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DIME NOVELS



SQUATTER DICK.

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A TALE OF TROUBLED TIMES.

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BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "MASKED GUIDE," "REDLAW, THE HALF-BREED."

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OR

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BY JOE E. BALDWIN, JR.

Author of "MAYNARD, JUNIOR," "HAROLD, THE HARBORER,"

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SQUATTER DICK.

CHAPTER I.

THE CAUSE AND THE VOW.

"YAS, sir, it's a resky job, but it's got to be did. Th' boss sais so, an' I'm jest the feller to do it. Thar'll be lots o' fun, an' I opine thar'll be oceans o' bullits a-hissin', an' sabers a-clashin' an' a-flashin', fer the Keedy boys hain't no cowards, an' thar gang's o' the same stripe. But s'pose I'd chaw my bullit, or run my head ag'in one o' them cutlashes; what'd become o' the wimmin folks? I must git 'em away from hyar, an' will, jest as soon's this job's over. But, business fust, as ol' Pap Price used to tell us boys when we went to school; then I'll take the wimmin whar they'll be safer'n they be hyar."

Thus soliloquized a small, wiry, mud-besmeared man, as he strode rapidly but noiselessly along a half-submerged road leading through one of the swamps that abound in the low lands of the "Carolinas." The river Ashley ran some three or four miles upon his right; the swamp was upon all sides. Here and there shone faintly a pond of water through the gloomy shadows cast by the towering trees; the gigantic, unbending oak, the tall, proud pine, and the cypress, the smaller cedar, the stunted "black-jack," shrouded by vines and tangled creepers. Indeed, it was seldom that even the rays of the noonday sun ever penetrated the depths below; it was always twilight or deepest night there.

The hideous alligator made its home within its recesses, together with its more diminutive namesake and brother, the terrapin. The deadly water-moccasin, the copperhead and the rattlesnake harbored there.

Often one of these latter were disturbed by the passage of the man, and emitted a sullen hiss as they crawled away, but such was evidently a familiar sight to him, for he scarcely vouchsafed them a single look as he strode along.

Dick Laflin, for such was the man's name, was one of the "poor white trash" that the country abounded with. A spare, rather slight frame, together with his mode of walking—his head hanging forward upon his chest, and arms drooping listlessly by his side—gave him the appearance of a weak, feeble man. But a second look would discern the firm, round limbs, the deep chest and muscular shoulders, tapering down to the small, round waist; then abruptly swelling at the hips; the long, sinewy thigh and well-knit joints, the shapely calf, and trim, well-arched foot and ankle. To the superficial observer he would appear an easy customer to handle; the knowing would affirm just the contrary. And the latter would be correct.

Dick Laflin was an active, courageous and shrewd man; the best shot for miles around, a good horseman, a cunning woodman, and a "fox at swamp-trailin'" was his boast—a well founded one. To these traits he added others not so creditable, but of which he was none the less proud. He could play a hand at "seven-up" with the best, could "turn Jack," ring in a "cold deck," or "stock" the cards—in fine, was a model swamp-gambler. He was a keen judge of horseflesh, kept a brace of fighting-cocks, and a bull-dog, crossed with mastiff, the champion of the country, at his shanty, some two miles from where he now was, just within the confines of the swamp.

He lived here, when he was at home, together with his mother and sister Sally. These two gained a scanty subsistence from the proceeds of their spinning and weaving, together with the little money Dick gave them when he was "flush," which event did not occur any too often.

Laflin was like all the poor whites, inordinately proud and lazy, and would sooner starve from day to day, than *degrade* himself by laboring at the same work as a slave, even at fair wages. Seldom, indeed, could you find one of these men laboring upon any of the plantations, even though their wife and babes were perishing at home for lack of food.

Such a person was Richard Laflin, the man we have now to do with.

"Le' me see; what am I to do? Fust an' fo'most the Kedy boys has got about forty men in thar gang, the wust in

the whole country. They is thieves, murderers an' Tories. Nobody outside the gang knows whar they meet, or how, so we cain't surprise 'em. Now Maje Crosby sais, sais he : " See hyar, Dick, I wants you to find out whar those Keedy boys randyvous at, an' the nights they meet, so 's we can bag 'em all to onect. Do this an' I'll gin you fifty goulden guineas." Sais I, " It's a whack, boss." " It'll be a tough job, but it's got to be did, an' I'm goin' to do it. Thet's settled. I've did some good jobs fer the rebels, as they call 'em, but I hain't told everybody on it, an' consequently nobody won't s'picion me when I tell those hell-hounds as how I want to jine 'em. Then, when I find out all thar secrets, why, I'll jest turn 'em over to Maje Crosby's rough-riders, an' the money'll make the wimmen folk comf'table till the troubles air over. An' then Sally can—"

He abruptly paused, and stooping, bent his ear to the ground for a moment. Then rising, he swiftly, yet noiselessly, glided from the road into a clump of underbrush that lined the right-hand side of the path. At a few paces distant Laflin crouched down beneath a bush more luxuriant than the others, where, half buried in water and mud, he awaited the approach of the horsemen that had alarmed him. An opening in the bushes afforded a fair view of some ten yards of the road.

He was not kept long in suspense, for the splashing of horses' feet in the liquid mud, mingled with the sound of men's voices in excited conversation, drew nearer, until at length they appeared in full view of the ambushed squatter. Laflin gave vent to a low exclamation, hastily arching his rifle as he leveled it at the foremost horseman. His eye was glancing along the deadly tube, the sight drew full upon the temple of the loud-voiced leader, his finger was upon the trigger ; but the gun was lowered without being discharged.

" No, Mat Keedy, your time hain't come yit, though you war never nigher to swallerin' your death-pill. No, 'twon't do, leastwise, not jist yit. I've other plans fer you. You made a narrow 'scape then, but it's got to come, the time has, when I'll pay you off fer murderin' poor Jean Lajoie. I've sw'ard it, an' I'm goin' to keep my word. Yes, the same kind o' death, too,

thet you gin him," muttered Dick, as the last horseman disappeared in the gloom.

Laffin came out from his covert, and again took the road, traveling at a more rapid pace than before.

"I'd like mighty well to foller you, an' see what devilment you're up to, but I hain't got time jest now. 'Tain't no good you're arter, I'll be bound, fer whar you four go, blood an' murder is not fur off. Wal, run the length o' your halter now, while you can; I'll fetch you up wi' a jerk bimeby."

So musing, the squatter strode along as though anxious to reach his journey's end. He was drawing near his shanty, and his step quickened as he saw that his tramp was nearly over. Suddenly he paused and drew a long breath through his distended nostrils. There was a startled look upon his face, and he was evidently disturbed. There was an unmistakable odor of burning wood upon the air. But his keen senses detected more. He could distinguish the stench of burning cloth—of wool!

Only a moment he paused; then, dashing his hat further upon his head, he darted forward with the speed of a startled deer. He feared—he knew not what. He dashed through the swamp, and at length stood upon the edge of the little clearing that surrounded his little hut. He stood as if turned to stone, petrified at the sight that met his eyes. Truly, it was a terrible sight for a son and brother to gaze upon!

The hut is merely a heap of smoking ruins; the little garden is laid waste. A body lies half-way between the fire and the trees; a body, but not a human one. It is that of the faithful watch-dog, poor Tiger. The spell is broken, and Laffin rushes toward the ruins.

A fearful sight meets his eyes, and he falters. Only for a moment, and then he is beside the forms of his mother and sister. The elder woman lies by the fire, so near that her woolen dress is charred and smoking. He carefully lifts the body in his arms, and bears it to the trees, where he lays it in the shade. He does not try to restore her; he knows it is useless. The saber-cut upon her head tells him that; it is nearly cloven in twain.

Then he returns to his sister, and bears her to where his mother lies. He feels her heart beat faintly, very faintly. He

reaches to the spring, and filling his hat with the clear, cold water, sprinkles her plentifully, again and again. At length his exertions are rewarded, and, with a feeble moan, she opens her eyes. She sees and recognizes her brother, then closes them again, and relapses into unconsciousness.

Presently she is able to tell the sad tale. How the mother and daughter were spinning and weaving, when a pistol-shot was heard, and then the door was suddenly filled with rude, rough men. How they caught and removed them from the house, which was then fired. How they—but let it suffice that the mother was killed in attempting to preserve her **daughter from outrage.**

Ladlin learned that there were four concerned in the outrage; the same he had seen pass him upon the road—Matthew, Mark, Seth and Luke Keedy, the bandit brothers. And that, as they left, one of them shot her in the breast, and left her **for dead.**

The brother stanchd the blood and bound up the wound, but all was in vain. As the sun slowly sunk to its rest, so did that young spirit leave its earthly tenement. One long, last kiss, and Richard Ladlin was left upon earth without a **single living relation.**

For a time the bereaved man sat in silence, his gaze bent upon the motionless forms of those he had loved so dearly, now still and cold in the embrace of death. Motionless, save now and then a quiver that shook his entire frame. There was a calm, stony look upon his face, though his eyes shone like twin stars. He did not weep; his heart was too **full of woe.**

The stars came out one by one until the vast, blue vault was thickly studded, yet he did not move. Not until the moon arose, casting his shadow upon the forms of his murdered kindred, did the mourner stir. Stooping, he pressed a kiss upon each cold brow, then strode away in the direction of the still smoldering ruins. He kicked several brands together, then kneeling he fanned them into a blaze with his hat. By this light he began searching the ground.

At length he found what he was looking for, an old ax, and returning to the tree beneath which his dead lay, he began removing the earth. With no other aid save the ax, and his

hands, a grave was at length dug. Then kissing them for the last time, Laffin gently lowered his mother and sister into the pit. A quantity of leaves and twigs were hastily gathered and thrown in; then the damp earth was heaped up over the grave. Kneeling by the side of the mound, Laffin spoke:

"Oh, Lord, hyar lays my mother an' sister Sally, murdered by those Keedy boys. Ef the Bible speaks the truth, you'd see 'em up thar, for they was jist as good as they makes 'em. Whatever they tells you, ye can swar it's true, for I never cotched either on 'em in a lie yit. They was al'ays kind an' good to me, even when I come home all drunk an' rascally with empty pockets; an' they'd give me thar supper when they'd a'most starved themselves.

"I 'member onct when I's drunk, I struck mother, 'cause she told me thar warn't nothin' in the house to eat. She could 'a' whipped me 'asy, fer I was drunk an' couldn't 'a' helped myself; but she didn't. She jist kissed me an' put me to bed."

"Good Lord, be kind to 'em an' gin 'em plenty to eat, for they didn't al'ays git it down hyar; and they's jist the best mother an' sister a critter ever had.

"An' now listen, Lord, an' mark down every word I say, fer I means it, every single letter. I never did anythin' in pertic'lar to those Keedy boys, an' they come like snakes when I's away, an' killed mother an' Sally. Now, those boys has got to die, and while one o' them is alive an' kickin', Dick Laffin don't stop huntin' 'em. The world hain't big enough fer us all ter live in it; 'ther they or I has got to go under. By night an' by day I'd hunt 'em, in the swamp or in the big cities; eatin' or drinkin', ridin' or walkin', awake or asleep; I'll kill 'em wherever I find 'em, 'less they wipe me out fust. I'll chew a bullet fer each o' the four, an' then let 'em bewar'! fer Squatter Dick, the Swamp Fox, is on thar trail, an' 'd foller it to the death.

"Lor', remem' er this, 'cause Dick Laffin has swar'd it an' he don't go back on his word, nary time!"

It was a strange, unique prayer, but one characteristic of the man who made it. When the last words were spoken, Laffin arose from the ground where he had been kneeling, and taking the ax, strode away into the forest.

Presently, quick, heavy strokes were heard, then a slight crash, followed by other blows. At length the noise ceased, and Larkin appeared in the little clearing, bearing in his hand a roughly-hewn slab of white pine. Approaching the grave, he sat down, and began trimming the slab with his hunting-knife. When this was done to his satisfaction, he placed the board across his knees and began carving the name of his mother and sister, together with the date and their ages. Then upon the reverse side he cut in large characters the letters, M. M. L. and S., one below the other. Removing the stopper from the ox-horn, containing powder, that he carried under his right arm, he poured the contents into the palm of his left hand. Then moistening it, he rubbed the mixture into the names of his murdered kindred, until they shone clear and distinct upon the white plank.

Again he left the clearing, this time remaining longer than before, taking with him both his rifle and ax. When he returned he bore a 'possum in his hand. Killing the animal with his knife, he filled the four letters M. M. L. and S. with the blood, and let it stand in the grooves to saturate.

"Mut Keedy, that blood is a sign o' the death you an' your precious brothers has got to die. Those letters has got to be kep' fresh an' clear, an' its *your* heart's blood as must do it. Yours an' the other three. Dick Larkin said it an' sw'ars to it."

"I was a man afore you did this, an' couldn't no more shoot down a body without I gin him warnin', an' a fair shake to flax me, ef so be he was smart enough, 'n I could fly. But now, it 'pears like I wasn't Dick Larkin no more; I don't feel like he usen to. My heart burns like a coal o' fire—fire 'at nothin' but blood'll squinch. It burns so't I can scarcely think, an' my head seems all in a whirl.

"It usen to do me good to think o' mother an' pritty Sally, it kinder put my heart to sleep, like, an' cleared out all the bad ideas, 'cept some times when I's drunk an' half crazy. But now, when I try to think that away, I can't. The thoughts that usen to come so free an' natural, like, is all gone. All I can think about is you bloody hell-horn's, an' somethin' inside my ar," tapping himself upon the breast, "'pears to be a hollow' for vingince on the dogs as murdered my folk.

" 'Tain't mother's voice, nor is it Sally's, for when they spoke it used to sound low and soft, like; an' this rings like the harrican a whistlin' through the limbs o' a dead pine. I can't tell jestly what it says, but you'll hear it afore long, or thar's no faith in a long bar'l an' a quick trigger.

" Yas, boys, ef you're sharp, you'll leave these diggin's in a hurry; but that won't save you, nyther, fer the devil thar's in me wouldn't let me leave you alone, even ef I wanted to, which I don't, an' never will. I'll foller you to the end o' the world fast, but what I'll hev revenge. It's war to the bitter end, now, atween us, an' I'll strike shore an' strong when you least expect it. But my head hurts an' I must git a lectle sleep, ef I can, fer I'll hev to be cummin' as the swamp-fox, an' still as the copperhead when I'm after you. I'll strike like him, too, an' the bite 'll be as shore death as his'n."

Removing the old slouched hat from his head, the squatter pressed his parched lips to the roughly-carved names upon the slab, and then drove it firmly into the ground at the head of the grave. Then lying down upon the camp earth, with the mound for a pillow, and one arm wound around the headboard, his over-wrought brain presently found rest in slumber.

It was a touching scene, this linking together, even in death, of mother and daughter, son and brother; the one warm in life and strength, the others cold and still in the depths of the grave. It was the one great redeeming trait in the rough character of the rude man, this pure and holy affection. The one beautiful oasis in the otherwise black and barren desert of his life; now, alas, blasted forever!

CHAPTER: I L

A SHOT AND A CHASE.

It was a clear moonlight night, several days after that on which our tale opened. The moon was near its full, and cast a flood of light over the earth that rendered objects in all the open tracts as visible as though it were noonday. But in the swamp and beneath the shelter of the taller trees, the dense gloom defied the power of the night-queen, and cast its sable mantle in deep contrast to the lighter spots around.

One of these dense clumps of trees, we now have to deal with. It was situated in the heart of a swamp, and for some thirty yards upon every side, it was encircled by a deep pool of water. In fact, it was an island, of perhaps a hundred yards in diameter. Several stately pines towered aloft in the center, surrounded by trees of smaller growth, and quantities of almost impenetrable undergrowth.

One might have passed and repassed the island, without so much as suspecting the existence of a house in that lone, wild spot. But such there was, and many a strange scene, as well as hideous orgie, had been witnessed by the old moss-covered logs that formed the four sides of the one large room. It was, in fact, the secret rendezvous of the bandit brothers; those introduced as the "Keedy boys." It was here that they met to form plans of rapine and plunder, and it was here that the stolen articles were stowed, until they could be divided or favorably disposed of.

Great precautions were taken to avoid discovery of their retreat, and their reason for this was, that, as Mat Keedy said: "Tory gold 'll buy just as much and good things as Whig money," and hence they were in bad odor with all classes. All was fish that came to their net. Numerous persons had sworn to hunt them down, and once captured, "short shift and a long rope," was awarded them. Still, their band increased, until now they numbered over forty men, the offscourings of the country.

Upon the night in question, business was to be transacted, and all the members had been notified of the fact. At the south-western extremity of the island, a large tree had been uprooted so as to fall across the water, the branches resting upon the opposite side. This had been done with so much care that it appeared to be the work of some compass, or the hand of time, rather than of man, as was the case. Thus a dry passage was assured to the island.

A dark, shadowy figure glided out into the moonlight, and cautiously began crossing to the island. When near the center of the tree he paused at the sound of a low hiss, like that of a snake when disturbed from its rest. It was a difficult point to pass, a huge limb having been broken off by the fall, and the splintered stump almost barring the way. On the left of this a few limbs were clustered together, closely entwined with, and almost covered with a dense growth of ivy.

It was from this covert that the hiss sounded.

The man spoke in a low tone:

"The Crew this low to-night?"

"Who says so?" rumbled a deep voice, from the ivy nest.

"King George and Mat Keady."

"Why?"

"The 'Black Band' plays to-morrow."

"All right—pass on."

The man caught hold of the stump, slinging himself under and around; then stood upright upon the tree-trunk.

"Who is it—Tadlock?"

"Yes; air the boys all in, Cliff?"

"Most of them; I'll be in directly."

Tadlock walked swiftly along the bridge, and across the open space, then entering the bushes, he stood in front of a good-sized one-story log-house. Giving a peevish knock, then a low whistle, the door was opened, and he stepped inside. The band had nearly all gathered, over thirty being present, and the captain, as Mat Keady was styled, arose from his seat at the long table, around which they were all ranged, and spoke as follows:

"Gentlemen—for we are all gentlemen, even if the name

livered hounds outside do call us robbers and murderers—I have called you together to-night, to show you that I have not forgotten your interests since we last met. You know it has been over a fortnight since we done any thing worth mentioning, and I, for one, am getting a little rusty for want of exercise.

"Well, last night I learned that old Kingston had sold a lot of cattle and sheep to a contractor for the British army, and got the real yellow shiners, too, in payment. He got a good round price for them, and I think we can dispose of those fourteen or fifteen hundred just as well as the old Tory can himself. So to-morrow night, unless some of you have something better to propose, we'll relieve the old gentleman of his charge," and he resumed his seat amid the low but hearty cheers of his men.

When the noise had subsided, a short, dirty-looking man, with a bull-neck and enormous shoulders, arose, doffing his cap and running his fingers through the shock of tangled hair that adorned his scalp, and addressed the captain:

"Ye see, c'p'n, I've kep' my eyes open a little, too, an' this is what I made out. El' Winans has called his boys to meet to-morrow night at the the house o' Eph' McLellan, an' he's g'ing to distribute arms an' ammynition among 'em. Bein' as we're rather short on it for weapons, an' as you has an old spite an' grudge agin' him, to wipe out, I thout there's a good chance to do it."

"El' Thornton, I thank you in the name of the band. This is good news, indeed, and I think we'll have to give the rebels a try, anyhow. Is there any thing more?"

"Yas, I've got a little more. Old Dexter an' his boys go to Dorchester to-morrow mornin', an' won't be back until late, if they don't stay all night. There'll be lots o' sawag, an' nobody to take care on it except the whineen folks, an' the niggers don't sleep in the big houses. An' there's two natch'ly pretty gals there, too, for them as likes s'en doin's," added Thornton, with a malicious wink of his solitary blood-red eye, at the company in general, as he resumed his seat.

The tall, dark man, of Herculean build, "bearded like a pard," said:

"I don't need to tell, but it's what you'll all be glad to hear, I can tell. Yes, s'ay, Dick Latta, or 'Squarer Dick,'

came to me, and told me a hard yarn about how Jim Slean's boys played the devil ginerally, down to his shanty, the other day, killin' the wimmin folk an' burnin' the house. He told me that so fur he'd kinder bin ag'in' the Tories, but that this had changed his feelin's, and as he had heerd as how we war down on Jim, too, he wanted to j'ine the band.

"I've knowed Dick fer a long time, and he's a mighty good feller, one that'll fight like blue blazes. He's the best "swamp sucker" around here, can shoot plum center, and hain't afraid of man nor devil. And as he's on good t'arms with the rebels all over the country, he can put us in a good way for business. I told him I'd let the captain know at the next meetin', an' see ef the band would let him j'ine."

This speech was greeted with cheers by all, save the four Keedy boys, and two others. The brothers withdrew into one corner and began a whispered conversation.

But there are events transpiring outside that demand our attention.

It was probably two hours earlier in the evening that a man approached the island on the opposite side from the point where the fallen tree rested. He crouched under the shelter of a bush and peered anxiously at the island for a short time in silence. Then retreating further into the swamp, where the shades cast by the trees rendered him invisible to any one unless close at hand, he began skirting the grove, muttering, as he did so :

"It must be hyarabouts, 'cause Bivins said they's to meet to-night, an' whar else could he be goin'? Blast that open trac', ef it hadn't 'a' bin fer that, I could 'a' follered him efar thar. P'raps they won't take me, an' I've got to dis-kiver them some way.

"Thar's a chewed bullit in the ol' gun, an' it res's mighty oneasy, I tell you! H—st, what's that?" he muttered, dropping to the ground, and peering eagerly through the bushes at the bridge, now only a few paces distant.

He saw a man suddenly glide toward the tree, and begin to cross. Then he paused and repeated the formula, after which he passed on and was soon lost to view among the underbrush on the island.

The spy had overheard a portion of the conversation, but

was not assured he had caught it all, so he cautiously crawled nearer until not more than a half-dozen paces separated him from the sentinel. His progress was very slow, as the slightest noise might betray him to the watchful ears of the guard.

He did not have to wait long, for another outlaw leaped upon the trunk, and again the passwords were uttered, this time by Tadlock. Dick also noted the name of the sentinel, and then repeated the formula over several times to himself, to imprint it upon his memory. Then, like a lizard, he retreated from his covert, until at a safe distance from the bridge. He had no doubt now of the identity of the place, for he knew that Tadlock belonged to the Keely boys' gang.

After waiting a short time, Larkin proceeded around to the tree top. In one hand he held concealed a heavy knife, the blade resting upon the inside of his arm. A rifle was slung over his back by a strap. He walked slowly along until the tree was reached. Then, meaning, he strode with a quick step, until near where he had seen the other men pause. Then came the low hiss. He understood the signal, and replied:

"The crow flies low to night."

"Who says so?"

"King George and Mat Keely."

"Why?"

"The Black Band plays to-morrow."

"Correct; pass on."

Larkin caught hold of the snag and swung around; then, passing, he peered into the leafy covert of the sentry. This maneuver cast his face into the deep shade. Then, as if recognizing the man, the squatter extended his hand, and said, in a low, eager tone:

"Why, Cliff, man, how are you? Whar you bin keepin' yourself lately? Give us your paw, ol' feller!"

"Is that you, Levering?" and a hand was thrust forward to clasp that of the spy.

"You're right it is! Come out hyar, whar a feller can see your mug," at the same time giving a powerful jerk upon the arm, that pulled the man out where the moon shone full upon his features.

"What the devil do—" Cliff angrily began, but the sentence was never finished; for Larkin's left arm arose and then

descended, clasp ing the deadly knife that was pinned to the belt in the fated sentry's throat.

Not a moan or gasp came from the stricken man, but his head fell back and he hung, a dead weight, by the hand that Lattin still held. Gently easing him down, the spy suffered the corpse to drop into the water, where it immediately sunk from sight. He did not pause to see whether it arose again, but placing the blood-stained knife in its sheath, he ran along the log and entered the shade.

Then he exercised more caution, and steadily proceeded until he came to the house. He could see the faint light shining through the chinks and crevices, and soon found where the door was situated. A subdued noise met his ear, varied now and then by a louder burst of laughter, or the clinking sound of glass. To lessen the chance of discovery, Lattin glided around to the opposite side from that where the door was situated, and crouched down by the side of a convenient bush under which he found a crevice large enough to admit his hand, where the chinking had fallen out.

Matthew Keely was speaking. Lattin listened with interest to the plans for robbing Kinston and the Dexters. Then came Bivins, and the spy listened in breathless suspense for the decision. While the leaders deliberated, his eyes roved over the walls of the room, so far as he could see them, and made a mental note of their contents.

It was a very large, oblong room; the walls were of rough bark covered logs, that had been chinked, but now most of this had fallen out. Slabs and boards were loosely laid across the rafters, thus forming a sort of loft. The walls were hung with old garments and dresses, guns and pistols, swords and knives, belts, bowies, and numerous other articles. In one corner guns were stacked also.

A rude table ran the entire length of the room, and around it was seated some thirty of the most ferocious-looking villains that were ever gathered inside the four walls of a room. There were exceptions, it is true, for there were good-looking men present, but as a general thing they were rough, dirty, rascals.

The consultation of the leaders now ended, and advancing to the head of the table, Mat Keely spoke:

"Boys, you all heard what Harry Bivins said, about admit-
ting Dick Ladin as a member of our band. He said true, that
Ladin was a good man for our line of business, and it now
rests with you whether he makes one of our number or not.
I, for one, am willing to welcome him.

"We will put it to vote. All who are in favor of his
joining us, hold up your right hands."

All hands were raised excepting those of Bart Tallock and
Bill Thornton. The former worthy especially appeared dis-
satisfied.

"Why, Tallock, what are you looking so grim about?"
cried Keady. "Don't you like the idea?"

"No, I don't. It's my opinion that that Slippery Dick is
a-playin' possum an' a-tryin' to pull the wool over our eyes
for somethin' or uther. I don't like him; he's a snake!"
growled Bart.

"But, don't you see that, even if you are right, it will be
easier to manage him here in the band, where we can keep our
eyes on him, than outside? Let him give but one sign of
treachery, and it will be his last. But, come, fill up and let's
drink to the good health of our new recruit and future suc-
cess of the 'Black Band.'"

The glasses and cups were filled to overflowing to do
justice to this double toast, and were elevated above the out-
laws' heads when the door was burst furiously open and
a man entered, greatly excited, exclaiming, in a loud
voice:

"There's danger around, boys. Poor Cliff Schultz is done
for!"

The greatest confusion prevailed, the men shouting and
cursing as they tumbled over each other in their haste to arm
themselves. Clear above the din was heard the voice of Mark
Keady, as he strove to quell the tumult. One man—it was
Mark Keady, the second in command, leaped upon the table
and called for silence.

Dick Ladin beheld all this as he peered through the crevice,
and bitterly reproached his folly in delaying his purpose so
long. He well knew that he was in great danger, and that
he stood little chance of escaping with his life, unless he fled
immediately. But revenge burned fiercely in his heart, and

he felt that he must strike one blow, even if his life should pay the forfeit.

Thrusting the muzzle of his rifle through the chink, he took a deadly aim at the man upon the table. Mark was the only one of the brothers that could be plainly seen, and when the double sights drew full upon the left temple, the spy touched the trigger.

Simultaneously with the report came a dull, heavy fall; then for a moment all was still as death. But without pausing to note the effect of his shot, Laffin slipped the strap that hung to his rifle, over his head, and darted through the bushes toward the pond. As he reached the bank he heard the rush of the outlaws as they emerged from the building in hot pursuit.

Leaping far out into the water the avenger swam with his utmost speed for the opposite shore. But the heavy splash was heard, and, before he gained the shelter of the friendly swamp his pursuers gained the bank he had just left, and the loud shouts, together with a hasty volley of rifle-bullets that hurtled around him, told plainly that he was discovered and that he would have to put his boasted shield as a swamp soon into play, to avoid the terrible doom that awaited him, if caught. Nevertheless, he paused for a moment upon the edge of the swamp, to shout, in a disguised voice:

"Tell Mark Keely that shot was for Charlie Servant's wife!" and then glided away into the recesses of the swamp.

He could hear the tramp of his pursuers as they eagerly hunted him, mingled with curses as they stumbled over half-submerged logs or came in violent contact with the trunks of trees. He could hear them shouting and calling to each other as they splashed through the mud and water, and smiled to himself in grim derision as he thought how foolish they were, and how differently he would have acted in their places.

But all the outlaws were not of this kind; there were some who glided along with comparative ease and silence, seeking to avoid by intuition the obstacles that so bothered the inexperienced. Among these were the three Keely boys, who were burning with a desire to avenge their brother's death upon his murderer.

Not over half a mile had the fugitive run, when he paused and stepped behind an enormous tree that stood close by. As he heard the sounds of pursuit draw nearer, he pressed close to the side of the tree furthest from them, and awaited in silence, the long, blood-stained knife clinched firmly in his hand.

He almost held his breath as the first of his enemies went by, breathing terrible threats of vengeance should they ever lay hands upon the murderer. Little thought they that the man they were so heartily cursing, was almost within arm's length of them, with a smile of mingled hate and pleasure playing around his thin lips.

Several times Ladin clutched the knife with a firmer grip as some one unusually bitter in their maledictions passed by his covert, and he was upon the point of adding another victim to his list. But somehow he could not bring himself to slay the man in cold blood, although he was then hunting him with the avowed purpose of taking his life. If either of the Kerdy boys had passed by so close, the case would have been far different, but these men had done no particular wrong to him. So he allowed them to pass unmolested, and after waiting for a short time, he started cautiously upon the back trail.

He succeeded in escaping an actual collision with the few scattered outlaws, although he made one very narrow escape, the men fairly brushing his clothes as he ran along. But this one was the last man he met, and in a short time Ladin stood once more beside the pond.

Looking warily around, he listened intently for a short time, but could hear nor see any thing to arouse his suspicions, and leaning his rifle against the tree, he crawled along and entered the water. He swam noiselessly across upon his back, only allowing his nose and mouth to appear above the surface, in order to lessen the risk of discovery, should any person be upon the island.

He passed again as he touched shore, but hearing nothing, made his way cautiously and silently through the tangled vines and bushes until he reached the building. Then creeping to the crevice where he had fired the fatal shot, he applied his eye to the aperture. It was a ghastly sight that

met his gaze, but one that filled his heart with fanatical joy.

Upon the table, just as he fell when he received his death wound, lay young Mark Keeley, his face streaked with blood that had run from his shattered temple. Despite his distorted features, it was plain that he had been a handsome man; although there was an unmistakable look of dissipation that told of deep drinking and unbridled passions. In truth, he had been one of the wildest and most feared of all the infamous "Black Band," and although he would be missed, he would not be regretted, save by his brothers and the other members of the league.

Laffin saw that there was no living person in the house, and proceeding to the door, entered the building. Casting his eyes around the room, he soon found a small flask partially filled with liquor. Uncorking the bottle he drained off the brandy; then, by the aid of his broad-bladed knife, he removed some of the gore from the table and poured it into the flask. Then, driving the cork firmly into its place, he slipped the flask into his pocket, and with his finger wrote upon the table, in characters of blood:

"*Number one. Retire!*" then left the room.

Two hours after this he stood beside the grave of his mother and sister, and stooping he moistened afresh the four letters, "M. M. L. and S.," with the blood contained in the small flask.

Then he lay down, his head resting upon the mound, and one arm wound around the redely-carved head-board, and soon slept as soundly and peacefully as though his hand had not that night sent two of his fellow-beings to their last account, with all their fearful load of sin, unrepented of, resting upon their heads.

CHAPTER III.

THE NEW MEMBER.

AGAIN it is night, and once more the Black Band is congregated within the smoke-begrimed wall of the lone house upon the hidden island. There is but little conversation, and a feeling of gloom rests upon the spirits of the majority. The sudden and terrible catastrophe by which two of their most trusted comrades had met a bloody death, a death that they knew not how to avenge, was yet too fresh within their memories to be forgotten.

As dawn came, after the unavailing pursuit, the trail was taken up and followed through all its windings, even back to the scene of the murder. Then the mysterious writing upon the table was discovered, and to their deep rage they learned that their foe had outwitted them—that while they were chasing a *shadow* through the swampy recesses, the *substance* had again visited their stronghold, and left the token:

"*Number one. Beware!*"

They knew not what to think. In vain they racked their brains; they could not conjecture who was the avenger. The only clue to work by, was the taunting words of the fugitive as he darted into the shadowy swamp.

"Ted Mark Keely that shot was for Charlie Sauvain's wife!"

The allusion was understood perfectly well. They all knew that the lieutenant, together with several others, had brutally murdered Mrs. Sauvain because she would not tell them where her husband—one of James Sloan's men—was concealed. But they also knew that he had been killed, so he could not be the avenger. They were completely at fault.

Captain Matthew Keady arose from his seat at the head of the table, and in obedience to the motion of his hand, all were silent.

"Comrades," he began, "you all know why we are assem-

bled here to-night. You know that Dick Laffin wishes to become a member of our honorable band, and that he is to be fully initiated to-night. Now he is a bold, cunning man, and if a true one, will prove an invaluable addition to our ranks. 'If,' I say, for I am not entirely assured that his intentions are what he declares them to be. But even so, we can guard against any tricks he may intend playing better while under our eyes than were he an outsider. And until perfectly convinced that he is on the square, I want you all to watch him constantly; not to let a movement of his escape your notice, but at the same time be careful not to raise his suspicions. For he is a man that I should far rather have for a friend than an enemy.

"But silence; I hear the signal," and he resumed his seat.

The door now opened and two men entered, leading a third, who was blindfolded. They led him into the center of the room, then stepping back a couple of paces, awaited their leader's orders in silence.

As Laffin found himself free he raised one hand to the bandage that obstructed his vision, as though he would remove it entirely.

"Hold!" exclaimed Mat Keedy, as he cocked his pistol with an ominous click. "Remove that bandage and you are a bad man. We must have some further security than your bare word that you are sincere and honest in wishing to become one of us. So until you *are one of us*, body and soul, you will not be allowed to see who are your future comrades."

"Well," gruffly replied Laffin, "what's the use o' talkin'. I don't care a cuss who or what you air, jist so you'll g'ive me a lift ag'in' Jim Sloan's boys. I'm ready an' morn' willin' to j'ine you, an' the sooner it's over the better. So what'm I to do?"

"That's well. Sloan's cowardly hounds number a deadly enemy for every member that belongs to the Black Band, and any schemes of vengeance you form against him, we will make it our own. But to business. Seth," who had been promoted to the office of lieutenant since the death of Mark Keedy, "bring the book."

As most of the members belonged to the rough, old-fashioned type of men, who, as a general thing, were very superstitious,

the Keelys observed a good deal of mock mystery and bombastic humbug in the initiation, that made it appear a more dreadful crime to break the laws of the band, than it might otherwise.

A slab was removed from one corner of the floor and a small book, carefully enveloped in an oilskin cover, brought to light and handed to the bandit leader. Then Latin was conducted to one end of the room where the long table did not interfere, and the members of the band ranged themselves in a circle, with their leader and the neophyte in the center. At a motion from Keedy each man drew his knife and held it in readiness. Then the outlaw leader spoke.

"Richard Latin, *alias* 'Squatter Dick, the Swamp Fox,' you say you wish to join our noble band, and give as a reason your hatred of Sloan's band of *patriots*, as they style themselves. A good reason, and one that we cordially indorse. But we only have your word for this, while we know that for some time past you have been quite intimate with him, and strongly suspected of being an enemy to our good King George. What are your reasons for this sudden change?"

"Come last week Jim Sloan, cuss him! an' some o' his men, latched the ol' woman an' sister Sally, an' burnt my home down. That's why!" cried Latin, bitterly.

"How do you know they did it?" queried Keedy, after a slight pause, and instinctively **clutching** the hilt of his knife.

"Come I scold his horse's track, an' I know it like a book. It usen to be mine, an' then he flows nobody to ride it 'cept hisself. Besides, he's g'n orders for his men to shoot me like a dog if I tried to enter his camp. Zene Carney told me so," glibly lied Dick.

"Well," continued Keedy, while a triumphant smile played around his lips. "I believe you, and so there is nothing more to be done except to sign your name to this list, after I tell you the rules that govern our band."

"We are lodged together, here, as you are aware, for the main purpose of relieving rich, stingy old codgers of their superfluous cash, and occasionally bestowing a castigation upon those who prove troublesome or inconveniently inquisitive; but all in a spirit of kindness, you know. I am aware that there are some of the ultra-factionists, who accuse us of being cruel

demons, and call us robbers, ay, and murderers ! But that is neither here nor there.

"Our band numbers forty-three persons, all good men and true, who are bound together by ties of mutual interest. Still, every man is a spy upon his neighbor, and should any one discover the least symptom of disaffection among the members, were it even his brother or father, he must report it to me, under penalty of *death*. To this strictness we owe our long secrecy ; without it, we would have been dispersed long ago.

"Should a member prove recreant or a traitor, the hands of all the remainder are against him. They are not to rest until he is found, and, once found, he must be placed where he can commit no further mischief.

"All the gains of the band are to be placed in our common receptacle, and then divided equally among all, your leaders sharing only as the rest. The rendezvous must never be approached in the daytime, except when so ordered by us, and the utmost caution must be observed at all times that no outsider is dogging your steps. This is all I have to say, except that my word must be law, unless you can convince me that I err. Are you still resolved to join us ?"

"I am," replied Larkin.

"Very good. Bate your arm. Johnstone, the light," and he made a slight incision upon the neophyte's arm, and catching a drop of blood upon an old quill pen, he said :

"Repeat after me, word for word, what I say.

"I, Richard Larkin, solemnly swear to support the Black Band through weal or woe ; to prove true to its interests in thought and deed. Should I prove unworthy, or false to the trust reposed in me, may the hand of every true man and member be turned against my life. May I never know peace or peace, health or good fortune ; may my thirst never be quenched, or my hunger appeased until my torment to others is as mine—until I can wipe out the stain that marks our coats upon the Black Band. In token thereof, I sign my name, with my blood, upon the scroll of the Black Band, and I am a member for life."

Then the bandage was removed from Larkin's eyes, and the book presented to him, in which he wrote his name with a black ink.

This done, he raised his eyes and looked around him, swiftly yet keenly scrutinizing the features of the members of the infamous and dreaded league. His features did not betray the astonishment he felt when he saw who were to be his future comrades.

He saw there some who bore the best of moral reputations, mingling upon the most intimate terms with the hideous, brutal murderer, horse-thief and gambler. Men who moved in the best society; even some who ranked high among the "shining lights" of the community.

They bore his gaze, if such it could be termed, with indifference. Had they known the thoughts that were flitting through his mind as in that rapid glance he registered them, one and all, indelibly upon the tablets of his memory, they would have rested none the easier that night.

But why should they suspect him? Was not he a member as well as they, and equally as deep in the mud as they were in the mire? No; they were unsuspecting, and well for him that it was so. Else had our tale come to an end almost ere it began.

The momentary silence was broken by Mat Keedy, who had reseated himself at the table, and pouring out a full bumper, said:

"Fill up, boys, and drink a hearty welcome to our comrade. May he have a long life and good fortune, as well as a speedy revenge upon that cursed hound and his pack of cowardly curs, Jim Sloan, the self-styled patriot! Drink hearty, and no heel-taps!"

Then the carousal waxed wild and wilder. The sound of loud voices in disputation; men talking, yet no man listening; the shouts and curses—the clinking of glasses or crash of an empty bottle as it was cast to the floor, formed a horrible *mélée*, that was only equaled by the raging of the tempest outside.

The scene is not pleasant, and we will turn elsewhere.

Two days after his initiation, Laffin met Luke Keedy at the house of one of the members of the band, where they had gathered to assist in raising a log stable. Just before the meeting broke up, he called out:

"Say, Luke—Luke Keedy!"

"Well, Dick, what's up?"

"What 're you goin' to do to-morrow night? Any partickler business on hand?"

"Well, not exactly. I was thinking of riding over to Tadlock's, but I can put that off if there is any thing better turns up. Wny do you ask?"

"Promise to go snucks, and I'll tell you," replied Laffin.

"All right—if I undertake the job. Go ahead."

"Come over hyar, where the boys cain't hear us, 'cause they might want a hand in, an' too many would spoil the broth; that's it; now listen.

"When I's at Dorchester yest'day, I run ag'in' a leetle Dutchman, who 'peared to have a pocketfull of rocks, and I consait hain't overly sharp. I got to talkin' with him, an' soon see'd he's great on the hoss-question. So I told him I was a hoss-trader, with a lot of prime animals, and would meet him at Alf Waker's sheding to-morrow evenin', and let him take his ch'ice.

"But I've got other business an' cain't be thar. Now s'pose you take a couple o' boys an' git him to playin' keords or throwin' the 'bones,' make him drunk, you know, and then clean him out."

"Are you sure he has got enough to pay us for the trouble, Dick?" inquired Keedy.

"Yas, dead shore, 'cause I see'd a whole handfal o' the yeller boys," declared Laffin.

"What kind of a looking man is he?"

"Oh, he's a leetle pot-bellied feller, wears a big shiny black cap; long black hair all over his face, and smokes a great big pipe all the time. His name is Wulf Clinkinbeard; p'raps you know him?"

"No; never heard of him before, that I can remember. Well, I guess I'll go, anyhow."

"It's snucks, now; mind you."

"All right," and the two separated, each going his way.

CHAPTER IV.

A GAME OF CARDS.

THE sun was not over an hour high when three horsemen alighted in front of Alf Waker's saloon, on Chestnut street. A stranger would have pronounced them quiet farmers or planters, but in reality they were the three outlaws, Luke Keedy, Bart Tallock and Sam Scott.

Throwing their bridles to the hostler the trio entered the house, and proceeded up to the bar. After greeting the landlord, who appeared to be of the same stripe, Keedy turned around and coolly scrutinized the persons seated in the room, some talking, drinking, smoking or playing cards around the tables.

His eyes sparkled as he noted a short, squat man, who answered to the description given by Slippery Dick of the green Dutchman, whom they were to pluck. Then:

"Come, boys," he cried, in a hearty, bluff tone, "come up and take something. I've got the dubs and no poor relations. Come, all of you!"

It is needless to state that this offer was eagerly accepted, and the bar was soon crowded, each one calling for the beverage that most suited his fancy at that moment.

In a short time Keedy drew the Dutchman into conversation, and when the proposal was made to have a friendly game of cards, it was at once accepted by Waker. Several games were played, the stakes being "drinks," and he was kindly allowed to win, one after another.

"It beats the devil how you do play!" exclaimed Luke, throwing up his hand and calling for whisky. "They make so much fuss here that I can scarcely hear myself think! I don't believe you could beat me if it was more quiet."

"So?" coolly drawled Clinkinbeard. "I din'ts I kin schussel beat you so vasser as oolt pe. I was a pally player, I is!"

"Say, Alf, haven't you got a quiet room where we can be by ourselves? Never mind the shot, I can stand it," said Keedy to the landlord as he brought the liquor.

"There's the little back room up-stairs, if it'll do?"

"Just the thing!—Come old fellow, what say you?"

"Yaw, I peen villing," grunted Wulff.

Under pretence of paying for the drinks, Lake drew aside and whispered to Wacker.

"Send us up some of the strongest brandy you have got, and don't let anybody come near us unless I call. We're going to bleed the greeny, and I'll make it all right with you, afterward."

The landlord nodded, and turned to show them the room.

"Never mind, I know the way. Send us up something to drink. Come, boys, let's go up-stairs where we can have a nice social game, all by ourselves," and the quartette started up the stairs.

But Wulff paused to exclaim:

"Say, you, misder man, send me eep some beer and pretzels."

"We hain't got no pretzels, but if crackers 'll do—"

"Yaw, dem vas peen Yankee pretzel. Send eep a fidd, a pig head, ver I peen looney like a tyll pig."

"Well, boys," said Lake, as they gathered around the table. "What shall it be—poker?"

"No, py tam! I blays sifen ub var'l, den blays," decided Wulff.

"Very well, Bara, you and I'll play tam, won't we? Call—lowest bet's—What say, Charlie?"

"I don't care. I blays you all, etc you says so. Puff! My tam! Py tam! she vas peen sick! Dats von arack. Your blay, mi der."

The game ran on for some time pretty evenly; the sharp playing of Wulff equalling that of Sam, who, of course, played into their adversaries' hands.

"Got in himself! yet ver you blays like dat? His vas peen der pigged drunk oak, and you tray say datk ver you peen got shoulder von! You need peen truth," cried Wulff, as his partner made a play more than usually good. "Py shinger, I blays mit you no more daren. Lets say hi efery man vor himself und der tyll he is sick!"

The trio were forced to submit, as Charlie played a desperate hand, and threatened to stop playing unless they called

he wished. Despite their tricks and cheating, the Dutchman continued to win, and the outlaws began to comprehend that instead of their blinding him, he was rapidly increasing his power, while theirs diminished in the same ratio.

Lights were brought up, together with more liquor, and the game was changed to poker. The stakes ran higher and the glasses were filled and emptied more frequently; still Wulf was the winner.

Tadlock and Scott began to grow drowsy, but although the Dutchman filled with the rest and appeared to be as drunk, it did not seem to prevent his good play. Keedy filled with the rest, but played "old soldier," pouring the liquor upon the floor as he got a chance.

At length Tadlock arose in disgust, throwing up his hand and declaring that he would play no more. However, in obedience to a wink from Keedy, he returned from the door and stood behind the lieutenant, watching the game, that was now reduced to three players.

It proceeded with varying fortunes for some time longer. Luke was anxiously but covertly watching for the liquor to overpower the sturdy Dutchman, so that he could be handled without making a disturbance. Plunder, not murder, was their object.

Nevertheless the landlord was Keedy's friend, and a rank Tory, he knew that there were plenty of persons in the village who would only need to hear his name spoken, to take the law in their own hands, right willingly. Besides, he could not trust the discretion of his comrades, now they were under the influence of liquor, for they had several times given their significant glances that they could soon end the game, if Luke would let them have their way.

Crackling and did not appear alarmed at this proposal, especially when it bore a far different meaning to it, as he had often heard them playing every day in the week.

The outlaws Tadlock and Scott, had been selected by Keedy for the purpose, among others, that he knew them to be strong liquor men, and counted upon making the Dutchman drunk, then robbing him without creating any disturbance.

But although he drank freely, and appeared very drunk, a slight action or look of his would deter him from committing

the deed he meditated, and with a suppressed curse he would push the bottle across the table, urging his adversary to fill up and drink with him. This adjuration was invariably complied with, but although the liquor disappeared, the desired result seemed no nearer than an hour before.

Keedy now whispered a few words to Tadlock, which that worthy received with a muttered remonstrance, saying that the other way was the shortest, and, therefore, the best; but disappeared through the low doorway, and was heard stumbling down the rickety stairs, blaspheming at every step.

Scott now essayed to rise erect, but as he pushed back his chair, he reeled and fell to the floor, where, after an ineffectual effort to arise, he lay grumbling and muttering in a husky tone.

Then he ceased, only to begin another tune, through his nostrils, snoring voluminously.

Keedy observed this with an oath, but Wulff only emptied another glass and refilled his huge pipe, shuffling the dirty cards for another deal.

Tadlock was heard climbing up the stairs, and after once falling half way down them again, he entered the room, bearing a capacious black bottle in one hand, while the other was outstretched to balance his drunken footsteps.

"Hyar she am, boss, an' all fixed up bally," dropping it upon the table where Keedy caught it before it rolled to the floor.

"Dry up, you drunken fool!" Luke exclaimed, angrily, casting a side-glance at the Dutchman, whose stolid countenance betrayed no signs of having heard the words.

Tadlock, muttering to himself, stepped backward, and his foot striking against the sleeping form of Scott, he fell sprawling full length upon the floor. Then he turned, and laying his head upon his comrade's body closed his eyes, declaring that he would have a snooze if it cost a lawsuit.

The door was now cautiously pushed open and the blotted visage of Waker appeared, but was withdrawn as Keedy angrily exclaimed:

"What the devil do you want? It's only these drunken fools. Now don't you come up again, nor let any one else come up until I send for you. I can't play if I am interrupted every minute; do you hear?"

"Yes, sir; all right, sir," and descending the stairs, the landlord explained the cause of the disturbance to his customers.

Clinkinbeard grasped the bottle and pouring out two glasses of the mahogany-colored liquid, he pushed one over to Keedy, bidding him drink. The outlaw raised the glass, and appeared to sip its contents. Suddenly the Dutchman said:

"Say, misder man, go und vake up dose hocks dere, und led's blay soom more dimes."

Keedy was only too glad of the opportunity to dispose of the drugged liquor, and as he shook the men he poured it down the bosom of Scott. When he turned to the table he beheld the other just pouring the last drop down his throat; then, patting his huge paunch, Wulff Clinkinbeard said:

"Coom, den, led's blay midoud 'em."

Keedy complied with alacrity and the game was recommenced, but in a few minutes Wulff appeared to grow more stupid, at length dropping his cards and leaning forward upon the table, closing his eyes heavily as he did so. The outlaw's eyes glistened with joy as he noted the effect of the drugged liquor, and throwing off the assumed air of a drunken man, he chuckled:

"Ah ha, my Dutch friend, I have you now; although I don't whether I shall get enough to pay me for my trouble. Lord, what a head for whisky you have got, to be sure! One would think you were the shell of a distillery, by the way you swilled the stuff."

"Curse those fools! I'm afraid I'll have bother in gitting them away from here."

As he spoke, Keedy swept the gold from the table, into his own pocket, and then producing a long coil of stout cord, he walked around the table, evidently intending to securely bind the Dutchman, so as to prevent his giving the alarm should he recover his senses before the worthy trio had made their escape from the town.

He pulled the chair Wulff occupied around from the table and pushed his feet close together; then stooping, he took a turn around them with the cord. But he went no further, for suddenly arousing, Wulff grasped him by the throat with both hands, effectually preventing any outcry, and bore him backward upon the floor.

Crouching over him he placed one knee upon each arm just below the elbow, while he sat heavily upon the pit of the outlaw's stomach. Keedy glared with astonished fury at the man whom he thought he had outwitted so cunningly, and who was now as sober as though he had never touched a drop of liquor in his life.

He was puzzled and attempted to cry out, but only a faint, husky gurgle was heard through the vice-like grasp upon his throat. He began to feel strangled and to turn black in the face.

Noting this, Wulff allowed him to get a little breath, but then closed his grip as he removed one of his shoes, and pulling off a not over-clean woollen sock, doubled it up and thrust it into the gaping mouth of the outlaw.

Then still holding it in place, he produced a large handkerchief and bound it tightly over the unique gag. Then as he proceeded to bind his captive with the cord that had been intended to serve him in the same manner, he spoke:

"'Tain't an overly nice thing to chew on, I can tell, but 'twill answer the purpose 's well 's any other. He! he! *comrade*, it s'prises you to see "Squatter Dick, the swamp sucker" turned to a Dutchman, does it? Wal, I don't wonder," he resumed, as he tied the last knot, then arising he turned the bolt to fasten the door.

"It's best to be sartin, and I don't want no visitors afore I'm through with you. I've got a little story to tell you; one that 'll explain why I greeted you fellows so," taking a seat beside the bewildered brigand.

"Some few days gone by—jest how many p'raps you can guess—*somebody* burned down my shanty an' killed both my mother an' sister Sally. Wal, I buried 'em an' swore to hev revinge on the hellions as did it. Can you tell me whar I'll find 'em?"

A negative shake of the head was the captive's answer.

"Oh ye can't, eh? Wal, I can tell you. 'Twas the Keedy boys as did it. Lay still, you infarnal sneakin' scoundrel you!" he hissed, pushing Luke's head back as he strove to arise.

"You can't get loose, so don't try. Yes, 'twas you an' y'ur brothers as did it, an' I swore to hunt 'em down an' kill 'em like dogs. I've made one mark a'ready, an' 'll soon

make another. 'Twas *me* as fired the shot what killed your brother, Mark, 'tother night.

"Your fella's wasn't a bit sharp. You didn't kill Sally right away, but she lived long enough to tell me all your didoes. That's how I know, an' why I jined the Black Band, as you fellers call it; so 's to be nearer you an' work better. An' now, say your prars ef so be you knows any, for in jest two minutes ye die!

"'Tain't no manner o' use to squirm, you dirty copper-head! It's got to come, it has. You didn't pity or spar' my wimmen folks, when *they* begged fer life; so 'tain't no use to cry. 'Twon't do no good, whetsoever. I know it ain't a man's act, to kill a tied-up enemy, but I hain't a man no longer. I'm a painter, an' you made me one!

"Time was when I couldn't strike a man when he's down, but you've changed all that. I cain't hear nothin' now but the v'ice o' mother an' Sally a-callin' from the air for venginee. I hear it all day an' all night long, when I sleep an' when I wake. 'Twon't be still tell you an' your brothers is all wiped out. Blood fer blood, they say, an' they must hev it. Yas, two fer one, they war so much better'n you fellers be.

"Come; time's up an' I must be off. Tell Mark 'at I sent you to keep him comp'ny tell the others get thar. You'll see 'em, don't fear; they 'a' got to go, too. Ready?" he demanded, as he drew a long, keen knife from his bosom, and held it up before the eyes of the terror-stricken outlaw, who strove in vain to cry out.

It was a strange scene.

The bound form upon the floor with his terrible enemy astride of him, brandishing the gleaming weapon in one hand, while with the other he bared the outlaw's brawny breast to afford a surer mark. The two other men lying there, snoring loudly in drunken concert; with the broken tallow-dip stuck into the mouth of a black bottle, casting its glimmering light over the actors in the dread drama of life or death; faintly shadowing forth the bare, stained and dilapidated walls and tin-colored ceiling. The floor and table strewn with broken and emptied glasses, greasy cards, and spattered with the foul-smelling liquor.

For a moment the weapon was uplifted, then it fell with a

dull, thrilling thud, followed by a strangling death-rattle. Again and again the blow was repeated, although the first one had proved fatal.

Then with a wild, demoniac expression upon his pale face, the avenger arose, and producing a small flask, held the corpse so as to catch a portion of the life-stream. Then lowering it, Laflin proceeded to wipe the blood-stains from his hands and garments.

Replacing his knife, he stooped and rifled the pockets of the three men, and then cast a last glance around the room, gazing with a fierce joy upon the body of the murderer of his kindred. Then he turned and left the room.

Entering the bar-room with a reeling step and gloomy, despondent look, he called for a glass of brandy, apparently not noticing the leer of the burly landlord, who said, as Squatter Dick drained the glass:

"How did your little game end, mister?"

"Got in himmel! vat you dinks, eh? Dem rollers been vin all of mine moneys away mid me. Donner lagel!"

"Then I s'pose I must lose my pay, eh? Well, never mind, I guess I can stand it," returned Waker, laughingly, as the pretended Dutchman reeled out at the door, where, with apparent difficulty, he mounted his horse and rode away.

When once clear of the village and into the shades of the wood, Laflin dismounted, and spitting out two pieces of pine, whittled into much the same shape as our feminine "plumpers," that had answered the same purpose, he broke them, and throwing the clothes into a pool of water, cast a pile of stones upon them, appearing in his usual dress. Then remounting, he sped away toward the spot where his shanty had formerly stood.

That night the significant letters M. M. L. and S., were moistened afresh until they shone blood-red in the beams of the moon. And a dusky form reclined by the side of the double grave, with pale, haggard face turned up in the moonlight.

CHAPTER V.

THE RIVAL SUITORS.

THE house of Martin Sollars stood facing the road leading south-east from Dorchester, distant some twenty miles. His flourishing plantation extended for miles back from the highway, and upon either hand of the mansion.

The crops were in prime condition, while the house and premises afforded a notable contrast to those of the majority of his neighbors. Every thing was orderly and neat, and a stranger set down here, to judge from this habitation, would little think that a horrible war had waged its desolation over the face of the fair country.

Truly, Martin Sollars was fortunate, and greatly to be envied.

The cause is easily stated. Mr. Sollars remained strictly neutral, and had high and influential friends upon both sides. Both Americans and British found a cordial welcome whenever they applied for entertainment, and the best the house afforded was placed at their disposal.

It is true, that several *rendezvous* had taken place between enemies when they chanced to meet at the house, but these *conferences* were few and far between. Night and day scouts and sentinels were on duty, and the approach of any body of soldiers was instantly announced, by a series of signals, to those in the house. By these precautions, he had so far prospered finely.

He would often have stock cattle taken from him, apparently by force, but it was very seldom that he did not receive pay for them. It was rumored that he had taken the British "protection papers," but from him the answer given was ever governed by the gentleman's creed. Thus, by a good deal of juggling lying, he had managed so far to weather the storm, and steer clear of the more serious breakers.

We need not describe the house; it was the traditional Southern planter's residence, familiar to all readers; with a

broad gravel drive leading through an avenue of the beautiful magnolias.

Near the house, standing beside the horse-block, was the dusky form of a negro, holding by the bit a beautiful bay mare, that pawed the ground with its shapely hoof, and impatiently champed its bit, as if eager for the road. From the caparisons, a lady was the anticipated rider.

Hard by stood another, stouter but serviceable, animal, bearing a rude saddle-tree without covering, and an old strip of carpeting for a blanket, upon its broad back, casting ever and anon a glance at its more fiery companion, as if reproving its restless demeanor.

Then a lady, holding her long riding-skirt from the ground, thus revealing a neatly-turned foot and ankle, as she tripped toward her horse. After a few moments spent in mounting, adjusting the flowing drapery and reins, she proceeded down the avenue and out at the large gate, followed at a little distance by the negro already mentioned.

A slight sketch must suffice of the fair *equestrian*; a description can not be given. Let one dozen persons attempt the task, at different times, and the result would be twelve portraits, all unlike save as to the rich, dark hair, the tall, graceful form, and large, lustrous eyes. She was not beautiful; none but those who loved her ever called her such; but there was a charm, a nameless something, about her, that enchained the senses, and added the beholder to her train.

Her form was rather above the medium height, but well filled and rounded, of matchless symmetry. But we can not convey a just idea of her personal appearance, so we will not try; only adding that her name was Ada, the sole child of Martin Sollars.

After a gallop of a couple of miles, Ada drew her fiery mare down to a walk, and removing the jaunty hat, framed herself with it as she slowly rode along the shady road. She looked unusually charming just then, her face flushed with her rapid ride, and her hair slightly disarranged, stirring in the playful breeze, while the rays of bright sunlight now and then shot across it, causing it to glitter with the blue-black sheen of a raven's plumage.

Suddenly her horse, with a snort of surprise, leaped into

long across the road, almost unseating its careless rider. A playful challenge to halt met her ear, and dissipated the slight feeling of alarm the start had given her. For right well she knew the owner of the clear, manly voice. As she quieted down her horse and drew her back into the road, the lashes parted, and a young man stepped forth and greeted her.

"Ada, darling, how glad I am to see you! Surely Dame Fortune favored my footsteps this morning, when I wandered in this direction, for I did not expect to meet you."

"Good-morning, James; you are quite a stranger. You were the last person I expected to see here," replied Ada, slightly blushing.

"Yes; *your friend*," bitterly emphasizing the word, "Colonel De Forrest, made my quarters rather warmer than agreeable, and as his force so far outnumbered mine, we had to choose another retreat; this time close to the casket that enshrined my jewel—my Ada," bowing over the ungloved hand that he still held in his grasp.

"I am sorry, very sorry," uttered Ada, withdrawing her hand hastily.

"Sorry for what—because I am here?" lightly rejoined the young man.

"No—oh, no! but that you and he are not better friends. He is brave, noble, and an honorable gentleman—" began Ada.

"And a British officer, consequently an enemy to all patriots; but especially to us, whom he has hunted, and would slay like dogs, were he able! And then, as if that was not enough, he must needs be a suitor for your hand—the hand that you have pledged to me. Do you know, darling," he continued, more calmly, "that I am more than half inclined to be jealous of this doughty 'Knight of the Scarlet Raiment?'" with playful words, but there was an air of ill-concealed anxiety beneath them, that told his heart was far from being at ease.

"It is hard, I know, James, but he is obliged to do it. It is distasteful to him, also, but he must obey the orders of those superior in command. You should not speak so bitterly of him, even if he is an enemy. I'm sure you couldn't have a more honorable one."

"I can readily believe that the task is a distasteful one to your paragon, for he is far more likely to win hard blows than honor; besides, the mud and swamp water soils his fine clothes so terribly. The bushes and thorns do not spare them, nor even his nobby pandy do his face and hands. He is so poor of, and I dare wager that he is laid up now, with them in a poultice of bread and milk to cure the scratches and remove the tan! Would you really believe, the dandy rode into fight with a pair of lavender kids on the other day?" ridiculed the young partisan.

"Did you find his blows any the weaker for that?" retorted Ada.

"No, I will admit that he is brave enough, after his sort," confessed the other, "as I can testify. He gave me this lame shoulder, but had not my horse went down from a bullet, he never would have lived to boast of it."

"Is it very bad?" queried the lady.

"Only a scratch that a week's time will heal. But seriously, my darling, I wish that you would not leave quite so much to do with this English officer. I have heard a good deal about you two, more, perhaps, than you think, and I tell you frankly that I don't like it."

"It is not my fault, James. He visits father so often, and I must treat him politely—"

"I fear it is more to see the daughter than the father that he stops so often and long at the house," reproached James. "But surely politeness does not compel you to take such long rides and walks with him, does it?"

"Really, you are too bad, James; he is a gentleman, and I like him. He is very pleasant company, and then the times are so unsettled now that it is dangerous to leave the house unprotected. Doctor Raynham says I must take daily exercise, and of course it is more pleasant to have Colonel De Forrest than that dolt, Tom, yonder," rather petulantly returned the young lady.

"But, Ada, you must remember that you are the betrothed of an American soldier, and that this would-be fascinating colonel is one of our most bitter enemies. I tell you it must be stopped, and the sooner the better!"

"Must, indeed! Mr. Sloan, you forget yourself. It is

not yet time for you to play the tyrant; and another such speech would sorely tempt me to retract the promise, given when I was, perhaps, too young to really know my own heart," retorted Ada, with a flash in her dark eyes that told how deeply in earnest she was.

The partisan was about to speak, but the hasty words were checked by the rapidly-approaching sounds of a horseman. The rapid, regular trot, as well as the occasional jingle of a saber striking against the saddle, proclaimed the rider to be a soldier. It was more than probable that he was British, and Sloan hastily examined the primings of his pistols and loosened his saber in its sheath.

Then uttering a low whistle, a magnificent black horse trotted out from the underbrush and paused by his side, with a whinney of delight. The young horseman vaulted into the saddle, and reining his horse across the narrow road, awaited the horseman's approach.

He was a comely sight then, as he sat his horse with a native ease and grace, and so thought Ada Sollars, although so deeply offended at his last hasty words. His short, curling, chestnut hair was nearly concealed by the broad-brimmed straw hat that was pushed back from his high forehead. This shone clear and white in contrast with the ruddy, sunburnt portion of his face that had been more exposed to the weather.

His large, deep-blue eyes sparkled with a soldier's ardor for the fray, and his firm, white teeth gleamed from beneath his heavy mustache, as his lips parted in a grin smile.

His form was tall, sinewy, and as lithe as a panther's, while the soiled suit of blue and buff sat well upon his form, although well worn and faded by long exposure to the weather.

The couple did not have long to wait, for the next moment the horseman appeared around a abrupt bend in the road, a few yards distant. Sloan was so stationed that his horse hid that of Ada, and when the rider spurred in view, he pulled up his charger with a force that threw him nearly upon his haunches, evidently thinking he had fallen into an ambush.

One hand dropped upon the ready holster, and half drew a pistol, when Sloan ordered him to surrender, at the same time leveling a pistol at his head. Ada, with a half-stifled cry, urged

her horse forward and paused between the two enemies.

"For shame, gentlemen, to draw weapons in the presence of a lady! Can you not find places enough to cut each other's throats without forcing a woman to witness your quarrels? Put up your arms, James, and you, Colonel De Forrest; let this strife go no further, I command you on your honor as gentlemen," she cried, with the haughty air that so well became her.

"Pardon me, Miss Sollars; I did not see you. I thought you were another of our *patriot friends*, like the worthy captain yonder," apologetically replied the new-comer, riding forward and lifting his hat with an easy grace; then favoring Sloan with a haughty stare that was returned with interest.

"Colonel De Forrest is pleased to be facetious," said Sloan, with illy-suppressed ire. "Perhaps 'twould be as well for him to remember that we meet upon equal footing now, and that he has not a regiment of soldiers to enforce his commands, showered upon a half score men, as when we met last."

"Ah, I see that the slight remembrance I left with you still rankles in your mind. But my name is well known, and those who wish to find, need not go far to seek," sneered the Englishman.

"Thanks for your courtesy; I shall most certainly avail myself of your kind hint at the earliest opportunity," retorted Sloan.

"Peace, gentlemen; cease this taunting. At best for the present. The one who first resumes it need consider himself no friend of mine," exclaimed Ada.

"Lady, your commands are supreme," gallantly quoth the colonel, bending low in his saddle.

James Sloan sat moodily in silence, mechanically playing with the butt of a pistol, and when the other colonel, he shot a glance full of vengeance and hatred from beneath his bent brows, that was returned by another equally as fierce and haughty.

"Miss Sollars, may I have the honor of accompanying you home? I was riding there on business with your father, when I fortunately met you here," said the Englishman.

Ada glanced toward Sloan, who curtly replied, seeing that she hesitated.

"Miss Sollars will remain here. I wish to have some conversation with her, of a strictly private nature, that does not require eavesdroppers."

"I await your reply, lady," said De Forrest, not heeding the rude speech of his rival, save by a haughty stare of contemptuous surprise.

"You have her answer, sir;" then, turning to Ada, Sloan added, in a low tone: "Ada, if you go with that brainless puppy yonder, all must be over between you and I."

"Very well, sir; suit yourself," in an offended tone, while her eyes flashed with insulted pride. "Colonel De Forrest, I await your pleasure."

The latter pressed quickly past Sloan, who half-drew his saber, but restrained his hand with an effort. And then the couple rode down the road leading to the plantation, leaving the young partisan in a mood it would be hard to describe.

At a little distance the Englishman turned in his saddle and glanced back, uttering a clear, musical laugh, as if in reply to some remark of his companion.

The sun shone clear and full upon his features, and a less-prejudiced observer than Sloan would have pronounced him handsome.

The clear, rosy complexion, fair and pure as a lady's, was redeemed from effeminacy by the flashing blue eye, tawny whiskers and mustache; leaving his dimpled chin clean-shorn. A tall form, rather slight built, but lithe and compact, endowed with more than common strength and activity.

Sloan sat in silence, watching the retreating forms, one of whom he hated with a deadly intensity; the other, one whom he loved with all the fervor of his ardent, fiery nature. He remained thus until long after they had disappeared from view, when he was aroused once more by the trampling of hoofs upon the hard, beaten road.

Quickly leaving the highway, he entered the bushes that lined the road, and pausing where he could obtain a fair view of the road, through a sort of avenue, he awaited the arrival with a heavy horse-pistol in either hand.

In a few moments he could discern the brilliant scarlet coats of a score of cavalry, that he knew belonged to the command of De Forrest. A grim smile swept athwart his visage.

and his eye lightened up with a joyful vengeance as he recognized them for the men who had hunted him and his command so hard and so far.

Then, as they rode by the avenue, two abreast, he leveled his pistols, and cried, in a stentorian voice, for them to halt and surrender. In their surprise they paused and huddled together, thus affording a good target. Sloan did not neglect his opportunity, but emptied one pistol after the other into their ranks; then cried:

"Tell Colonel De Forrest that Captain Sloan sends him his compliments!" and then spurred away through the swamp.

Pursuit was instantly made, but the difficulties soon discouraged the troopers, who feared being drawn into an ambush, and they returned to the road where lay the forms of two men; one dead and the other badly wounded. Then they slowly pursued their way to the house of Martin Sollars.

Sloan rode rapidly until he was assured that the chase was abandoned; then, changing his course, he proceeded more leisurely through the swamp, along a half-submerged path that wound deviously between two pools of stagnant, slimy water.

The hideous form of the alligator floated in the leathery pool, while from beneath nearly every tuft the deadly moccasin, or copperhead, glided away, disturbed from their rest by the splashing of the horse's hoofs.

But the partisan did not heed them. His mind was full of thoughts of his offended betrothed, and he could see, now, how foolishly and rudely he had acted. He well knew, too, the proud and imperious nature of Ada, and feared that the breach would not easily be healed over.

Then the hated form of his rival would obtrude itself, and he gritted his teeth as he recalled how politely familiar he had been with Ada, and that she seemed in nowise loth to accept of his attentions.

While thus musing, he came upon the edge of a wide and deep pool, and plunging in, swam his horse across it. When he landed, he was challenged by an unseen picket, and after giving the password, he pressed through the line of bushes, and stood upon the outer edge of the encampment of the partisan band, better known as "Sloan's Rangers."

It was situated in the center of a swamp, being surrounded

by water upon all sides ; an island, in fact. The ground was dry where the camp was pitched, being considerably higher than the level of the swamp.

Several piles of ashes still sent up tiny jets of light, fleecy smoke, while horses were tethered to the surrounding trees and shrubs, in every direction. Close to each was its respective equipage, and upon their heads remained the bridles, only with the bits let down upon one side.

Men, rough-looking, with clothing tattered and travel-stained, bespattered with half-dried mud from head to foot, with shaggy hair and matted whiskers, that looked as though they had never heard of the art of hair-cutting, were lying singly or in groups upon the ground ; some sleeping, talking, or playing cards.

Others were trying to mend their clothes, whistling or humming a bar of some half-forgotten tune, ever and anon uttering an exclamation of impatience, as the thread tangled, or the sharp needle pricked his clumsy fingers.

Others still were cleaning and examining rifles and pistols, removing their loads, or scouring the rust from lock and barrel ; or sharpening saws and long, heavy hunting-knives, with a care that told how greatly they relied upon them, the tools of their trade.

The leader only replied to their respectful salutations by a nod, and hastened toward a more retired spot, where he gloomily reclined upon the ground, his mind filled with bitter reflections. A slight form silently followed him, and sat down at his feet, looking with an affectionate gaze into the young partisan's face.

Then, taking one of the hardened, sinewy hands between his own slight, tender palms, the lad chafed it with a caressing touch that in itself betrayed the deep love existing between the two brothers. For that such was the tie between them, one glance at the two, when together, would betray.

There was the same hair, eyes and features ; the same proud, haughty curve to the mouth and chin, in the younger, that was so prominent about the elder brother. The youth was dressed in a neat, closely-fitting suit of gray cloth, that revealed his girlish, but active figure to perfection.

At length the captain looked down at the lad, and a pleas-

ant smile lit up his face as he returned the pressure of the small hand, tenderly, and then drew the curly head down into his lap, smoothing the hair and patting his cheek with the soft touch of a woman; then, bending over, he pressed a kiss upon the broad, white brow, murmuring:

"Ah, Bertie, you at least love your rough brother, don't you?"

CHAPTER VI.

"SQUATTER DICK" PEACHES.

BEFORE the youth had time to reply to his brother's question, the low, guarded challenge of a sentinel was heard at a short distance from where they were seated, answered in a low, drawling tone that they immediately recognized.

In a few moments the sentinel appeared, conducting a slight, mud-stained and wet form, whose slouching steps and down-cast air was enough to proclaim the squatter, Dick Latlin. The former paused before the brothers, awkwardly touching his hat, then pointing to the listless "swamp sucker," said:

"Cap'n, this 'ere feller said as how he wanted to see you on business, an' so I made bold to fotch him hyar."

"You did perfectly right, Whalen. Well, Dick, what's in the wind now?" asked Sloan.

Latlin did not answer, but cast a sidelong glance at the soldier who still stood near.

"Why don't ye answer when the cap'n speaks to ye?" angrily muttered the latter.

"That will do, Tom. You may go back to your post now," then he added, as the partisan moved away. "Speak out, my man, there is no one here now but ourselves."

"You know, Cap'n Jim, that I told you when I see'd you last, that I war goin' to make b'lieve to j'ine the Keely boys' band, an' try ef I couldn't break 'em up. Wal, the very next day those four devils stopped at my shanty while I's away, an' butchered mother an' sister Sally; but I got thar these sis-y died, an' she told who they war. Then, as you may

guess, I swore I'd hev revinge, an' now I've j'ined thar gang, so they don't s'picion me."

"You know old Daddy Sollars an' thet he has dealin's with this British ossifer, Kurnel De Forrest is his han'le, I think. Anyhow, the Keedy boys has heerd as how he's got a pile o' money in the house, an' they've made up thar minds to hev it."

"What do you mean? Come to the point at once! Do they intend to attack the house, and if so, when?" impatiently exclaimed Sloan.

"They jest do, with forty-three men, an' to-night's the time. It war all cut an' dried last night, an' I hunted you up as soon as I coul'd. But ef I hadn't 'a' bin hid in the bushes when you popped over them two red-coats, I don't believe I'd 'a' found you in time," added Laffin, as he seated himself at a little distance.

"At what time do you suppose they will make the attack?"

"Not afore one o'clock, 'cause you see they've got a good long ways to travel. An' then they won't start till late, so the folks in the big house 'll be all a sleep, an' won't hev time to make much fuss afore it's all over."

"Now what do you 'tend doin' about it? In course you won't let 'em hev it all thar own way?"

"Not likely. But it's a mixed-up job, and I'm afraid trouble will come of it. There are some twenty soldiers at the house, Colonel De Forrest's bodyguard; and what is more, they have had several turn-ups with my men—a fact that I f— neither side will forget."

"A— would a quarrel arise—not but I know my pets could hold their own with the 'lobster-backs'—we would be in a sweet pickle if the Black Band should attack us then. If I only had the boys that the major drafted!" mused the young partisan, rather to himself than in reply to the sand lapper.

"Do you go with us?" he added, abruptly, as he arose erect.

"No, I can't. I must be at the rendezvous with the rest; ef I wasn't, they'd s'picion me right off. But be shore I won't do 'em much good, an' they'll hev one more to deal

with than they counts on. Seth Keedy goes under to night. But what's your plans, anyhow?" replied Laffin.

"The house will be barricaded and we inside, stationed at the windows. The moon will shine clear, and they must expose themselves. One volley, and one charge home; then follow until we have wiped out the last knave of them," rapidly detailed Sloan; then adding:

"But be on hand, for we may need you to guide us to their retreat on the island," he concluded, as he conducted the squatter beyond the lines, where he had left his animal, one of those rough, uncouth, but swift and hardy ponies, termed "swamp-tackies."

After watching until Squatter Dick disappeared among the shades of the swamp, the young partisan retraced his steps to the camp, and pausing upon the highest ground near the center of the island, called his men around him. When all were silent, he doffed his hat, and spoke:

"Comrades: you all saw the man who just left? Well, he brought us news; whether good or bad, I leave you to decide. There are few of you who have not some cause to hate the gang known as the 'Black Band' of Mat Keedy, and who would not like a chance to wipe off old scores.

"To-night, if willing, you shall have that opportunity, for they intend visiting Mr. Sollars' plantation, to rob him, and, as I suspect, abduct his daughter; for I know that Keedy had hopes in that direction before the war. I know that when I tell you she is my cousin, that you will join me. Am I right, comrades?"

An unanimous murmur of approval ran around the little group, and a flush of pleasure reddened Sloan's brow. Then he resumed.

"But there is one drawback, that I fear you will consider a most serious one. Colonel De Forrest, of the British army, with a score of his bodyguard, are stationed at the house. They might beat off the attack, but the outlaws outnumber them two to one. Our party will almost equalize this.

"I know it will be a disagreeable task, and I would not ask it of you if there was any other resource. Do you think you could mingle for an hour or so with the soldiers, without

getting at loggerheads? For my sake?" he added, as he saw the looks of surprise glancing from man to man.

Then, after a few moments' pause, Tom Whalen stepped forward and quoth:

"Cap'n, I think I can speak for the boys. If so be they don't put upon us, more'n a white man can bear, we'll do it. We'd first clear out the Tories, an' then wade into the lobsters. What d' you say boys—'m I right?"

There was but one answer, and Sloan warmly thanked them as he pressed the hand of each in turn. Then he detailed his plans.

Toward the middle of that afternoon the young partisan rode out from the hidden camp and proceeded toward the plantation of Martin Sollars. When he appeared in full view of the house he secured a white handkerchief to the point of his sabre and slowly advanced toward the great gate.

There were several red-coated soldiers lounging about the grounds, and when within a score of yards of the gate, a sentinel stepped in view and challenged the young partisan.

"I bear a message to your commander, Colonel De Forrest, of the greatest importance," answered Sloan.

"Who the deuce are you, bany'ow?" grumbled the soldier.

"That concerns your betters," haughtily replied Sloan. "Call a man and deliver my message or I will report you, you scoundrel!"

The sentinel, cowed, did as ordered, and the messenger returned in a few moments, saying that his commander would meet him upon the verandah. Dismounting, the partisan was conducted to where the British officer was awaiting him, in company with Mr. Sollars.

The greeting was somewhat constrained upon both sides, the planter muttering something about his nephew being quite a stranger; a remark that the latter did not choose to hear. The colonel first broke the silence:

"Your messenger informed me that you had tidings of importance for me. May I ask what it is?"

"You may," coolly returned Sloan; then turning to his uncle, he added:

"Mr. Sollars, you have a considerable sum of money in the house and—"

"Really, my dear sir, if you came collecting tribute, it should be with a stronger force at your back," lazily drawled the colonel, as he seated himself in an arm-chair and began paring his finger-nails, not heeding the fiery glances that Sloan darted upon him.

"This is a specimen of your vaunted English courtesy, I presume. But it is only another item in your account," sneered the partisan.

"As I was about to say, Mr. Sollars, when your friend so politely interrupted me, that the fact of this money being in your possession, has become known to Mat Keedy's band of Tories, and that an attack will be made upon your house to-night, by nearly fifty men."

"Are you prepared to meet it? Think of your daughter, and remember that this Keedy is a rejected suitor for her hand. What would be her fate if the attack proved successful and she fell into his power?"

"And how comes it that you are so well acquainted with the plans of this outlaw?" demanded the colonel, now fully aroused.

"I have it from a trustworthy source. And now, sir," turning to the officer, and speaking in an earnest tone, "I address you as a gentleman—as a soldier; but let bygones be bygones, and forget any animosity we may have for each other, for the time being."

"Have you any troops that you can get here before ten o'clock? Speak plainly; my present force does not outnumber your own," he added, as the other eyed him steadily, as if he would read his secret thoughts.

"I will trust you, sir; and if heretofore I have mistaken you, pardon me. To speak candidly, the men I have with me are all I can command, at present," slowly returned Colonel De Forrest.

"Thank you, sir. I have a proposal to make, which I trust you will consider well. You will be entrusted with two to one, and, although your men are brave, as I can testify"—with a faint smile—"the men you will have to do with are the most desperate, ferocious set of demons that ever gathered in the whole country. You might beat them off, but it would be at a fearful loss, even then. They would not hesi-

tate for a moment about firing the house, if they were foiled.

"Now, I have a score of men, good and true, not one of whom but has suffered in some way by these outlaws; and they have consented to temporarily bury all feuds with your men, for the sake of revenge upon the Black Band, as they are called.

"And I give you my word of honor, as a man and a soldier, that no advantage will be taken if you agree to my plans. With our forces combined we can annihilate the gang. Mr. Sollars can testify as to whether I am a person to break my pledge. Besides, remember it is my relatives I wish to protect," he added, earnestly.

"I do believe, and will trust you," cordially replied the British officer, as he grasped the extended hand of his rival. "And after this affair is over?"

"We stand upon the same footing as we did before this interview."

"Thank you. When will you bring your men?" rejoined De Forrest.

"Between nine and ten o'clock. It will not be prudent before, and the attack will not come off before midnight, if so early. You think you can answer for your men?"

"As for myself. And yours?"

"Have passed their words that they will not take offense at any thing a man can endure, and I know they are perfectly sincere, as they have a far greater cause for enmity against these outlaws than your soldiers. I will answer for them," warmly replied Sloan.

The two soldiers left the house and walked down to the gate, where they parted with a far better opinion of each other than they would have believed possible an hour before.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SWOOP OF THE BLACK BAND.

AT the designated time James Sloan led his men up to the great gate of the avenue, where he was met by Colonel De Forrest, who greeted him gladly ; and then the entire party filed into the house and took the station assigned them at the windows.

The house was darkened ; not a light was burning, save one, and the shutters of that room were tightly closed. For a time both the young leaders were somewhat uneasy, lest the party feeling should break out openly between the two bands, and kept upon the alert, going from one point to another. Altogether, the time passed drearily enough.

At about the same time that the young partisan reached the mansion, the Black Band, now led by only two brothers, Matt and Seth Keedy, filed out from the woods immediately surrounding the little island upon which was their rendezvous. They rode in silence, all conversation being forbidden ; or if one man ventured to speak to his neighbor, it was in such low tones that only the ear addressed caught it.

Had it not been for the splashing of their horses' hoofs in the swampy trail, one might have fancied it was a procession of evil spirits. Not but that they *were* evil enough, and were well supplied with abundance of spirit, as well ; but the grating oaths they would utter, as now and then a horse's hoof sank deep into the mire, almost throwing its rider from the saddle, savored strongly of flesh and blood.

With them rode Squatter Dick, who was gloating over his anticipated feast of vengeance, for as he had told the young partisan, James Sloan, he had determined that Seth Keedy should die that night, thus making the third installment of his revenge. As for Matthew Keedy, his was to be a different kind of death, a retaliation in kind.

When near the planter's house, they dismounted, and securing their horses within the wood, cautiously advanced upon

foot. They intended surrounding the house, so closely as to prevent any egress without their knowledge, and then, if the alarm should be given before their object was accomplished, they could easily beat off any attempt made by the negroes, who would not be likely to have any weapons at their cabins of any account.

A band had been selected to enter the house and plunder it thoroughly, while the others kept guard without. Laffin was included among the former, as he knew perfectly every detail of the interior. They were unaware of the soldiers being at the building, as Dick had assured them there would be no persons save those belonging to the place to encounter, when he returned from his visit to Sloan's Rangers.

Laffin was not entirely at ease, for he knew not how far Sloan had succeeded in his plans, and he was certain that, after this night's work, he would be a marked man among the members of the Black Band, as his treachery would most probably be exposed.

But at any risks he determined to give the alarm, so that those at the plantation, if upon the alert, would know that they were coming. It was dark within the gloom cast by the trees, and Laffin did not fear discovery. So he drew closer to one of the outlaws, who carried his gun across his shoulder.

He spoke to the man in a low tone, asking some trivial question, and at the same time deftly cocked the musket without the owner's knowledge. Then at the pressure of his finger the hammer fell, and the gun was discharged with a roar like that of a miniature cannon, echoing through the forest and over the level fields upon the still air.

"Thousand devils!" exclaimed Mat Keedy. "Do you want to raise the whole country that you fire off your cursed old thunderbuss in that way? Who was it?"

"Swackley, sir," replied Dick.

"It was an accident, captain," hastily added the culprit.

"It went off by itself, like."

"If I thought it didn't, I'd— But come on. The quicker we get to the house the better, now, for if they once get wind of us, they may give us trouble," added Mat, hastily pressing along the path that led directly opposite the gate.

Scaling the fence they advanced toward the house, keeping as much under cover of the shrubbery as possible. They had to use great precautions, for the moon shone brilliantly, and out from the trees every object was revealed with almost noonday distinctness. There was no light to be seen in any part of the mansion, or the negro quarters, and all was still as death.

When the outlaws noted this their spirits rose and they grew less cautious, for it seemed as though the unfortunate shot of Swackley had raised no alarm. They had advanced to within fifty yards of the building, and yet no sign was given to show that the inhabitants of the dwelling were upon the alert.

Mat Keedy now spoke to his brother, in a whisper, and then two others, who promptly followed him as he struck off to the right, skirting the house. Laffin noted this action without fully comprehending the meaning of it, but as his intended victim remained behind with the main body, he kept with them, in the background; only awaiting the proper moment to deal his blow for revenge.

Then came a long, low whistle from the side of the house, and as if it was the signal for which he was awaiting, Seth Keedy gave the word to advance. All but one man obeyed him, for Dick Laffin was far too wise to run his head into the trap he had set for the Black Band, and closely hugged the rear side of a tree sufficiently large to shelter his body.

The bandits rapidly but cautiously advanced across the clear, open space, where they were plainly revealed to any one who might be looking forth from the building, upon that side. Half the distance was traversed, and then, when they were within twenty yards of the house, a loud, clear voice from within gave the startling order:

"Fire!"

Then a sheet of flame spouted from each of the lower windows, and a withering storm of bullets were sent into the ranks of the outlaws. For a moment they paused as if thunderstruck, and then as a swarm of armed men poured forth from the doors and windows, the survivors broke and fled with cries of surprise and despair.

As the volley came, Squatter Dick had a bead drawn upon

Seth Keedy, but as he pulled trigger the outlaw swerved, and a mere flesh-wound was the result. With a curse of rage, Latin drew his knife, and as the outlaws broke in confusion, he, keeping an eye upon his intended victim, glided along in such a direction as would intercept his flight.

Seth Keedy plunged into the undergrowth, but in his terror did not perceive the dusky figure confronting him, until it was too late. Latin leaped forward, clutching his enemy by the throat, bearing him backward to the ground in the suddenness of the onset. Then with one knee upon his foe's breast, Latin took the knife from between his teeth, and as he raised it aloft he lissed in the man's ear:

"Sir, I am Squatter Dick, who killed your two brothers for wipin' out my wimmen folks, an' now I'll send you arter 'em!"

At the last word his arm descended, and with one convulsive quiver, the brawny limbs of Seth Keedy straightened out in the embrace of death, and the look of terror with which he had heard the words of his slayer, froze upon his features.

Latin heard a rustle behind him and hastily turned his head.

"Ah-ha! you cursed sneak, I knowed I'd find you out! Take that!" lissed a voice that he well knew, and he heard the crash of a musket butt as it was directed with crushing force at his head.

He had not time to entirely avoid it, but bending to one side the weapon alighted upon his left shoulder instead of the spot at which it had been aimed. Had it struck fairly, his arm would have been shattered like a pipe-stem, and as it was, although glancing off, it entirely disabled his left arm.

"Curse you, Bunt Tallock, I'll hev your life for that!" snarled Dick, as he half arose, and plunging forward drove his head with stunning force full against the pit of his adversary's stomach.

Tallock went down before the shock, but as he fell threw out his arms, and catching Dick, pulled the latter down upon top of him. Had Latin been in full possession of his strength, the struggle would doubtless have been soon ended, owing to the advantage he had in position, but he could

scarcely move his left hand or arm, and it was more an incumbrance than of service to him. Besides, he was totally unarmed. In the suddenness of Tadlock's onset he had been unable to withdraw the knife from the body of his foe.

Burt Tadlock tightly clasped the sand-bagger in his arms, and as soon as he began to recover from the sickening effects of the blow he had received, he made a strenuous effort to turn his foe. For a time he was foiled by Laffin, but the latter labored under a serious disadvantage, and he knew that unless help should arrive, and that speedily, he would not be alive to boast of his exploits in the morning.

So he began calling for assistance, using the young partisan's name, at the top of his voice. As if the exertion had weakened him, Laffin felt Tadlock slowly glide from beneath him, and that he, himself, was being turned upon his back. For a time he prevented this, and at the same time continued his shouts for Sloan.

"'Twon't do, ye varmint; 'tain't no manner o' use a crech-in'. Yer time's come, an' ye goes under, shore!" growled Burt.

The cold sweat started out upon Laffin's brow as he felt himself pinned to the ground, despite his struggles and writhing, and he shuddered at the thought of his end being so nigh. Not that he especially dreaded death, or had a spice of cowardice in his composition; far from it.

He was as brave a man as could well be found, but he dreaded the idea of death, not for itself, but because his revenge was not yet complete. Had Mat Keedy been dead, he would have perished before calling for help against one man. But for that he wished to live.

Once more Squatter Dick called aloud the name of the young partisan. He heard the rushing sound of a man rapidly approaching. Burt Tadlock partially arose, and elevated his knife to deal the finishing blow.

But it descended of its own accord, for the heavy, heavy blade of James Sloan swept through the air and cleanly cleaved the outlaw's head in twain, so deadly was its force. Laffin glided nimbly to one side, for fear his rescuer should favor him with one of the same sort, in ignorance of his identity, owing to the gloom.

"Don't strike, Cap'n Jim, don't strike! It's me—Squatter Dick, you know," he hurriedly uttered.

"So I thought, when I heard my name. But how is it; are you hurt?"

"Darned if I rightly know, but I reckon thar hain't no bones broke," returned Lallin, carefully feeling of his injured arm.

"Well, come on then. The thieves are whipped, but while one of them lives, our work is not finished," exclaimed the young partisan.

"You're right thar, cap'n. I wiped out Seth Keedy, but the black devil hain't catched yit. That is ef he hain't bin knocked over by some o' your fellers. Let's mosey, anyhow," said Lallin, as he regained his knife and rifle.

They had scarcely emerged from the grove of trees when they heard a series of loud screams in a woman's voice, sounding from the house, as if in mortal terror; then followed by a confused shouting and cursing in a man's tones.

"Somethin' wrong thar, Cap'n Jim," said Lallin, excitedly.

"My God! yes. Come, we may need help!" exclaimed the partisan, as he darted forward at the top of his speed, not heeding the flower-buds in his haste, closely followed by Squatter Dick, who contrived to load his rifle as he ran.

CHAPTER VIII.

A FEARFUL BLOW.

The party within the great house had been fully aroused and put upon the alert by the shot that Squatter Dick had so adroitly managed to discharge, as he had intended they should be. Then, when the outlaws entered the grounds they were plainly observed, although there almost immediately hidden to view among the trees and shrubbery.

But the partisan had committed one bad oversight. The main force was stationed at the front of the building, as that was the most feasible point for an entrance to be

effected by the robbers. And although sentinels were posted at the other sides, when the word was passed that the enemy was approaching in front, every man rushed to that point to have their share of the fight, thus leaving the other sides of the house unguarded.

During the excitement this fact was unnoticed by the commanders, their whole attention being directed to the lawn. This was the error they had fallen into, and by it, Matthew Keedy, together with his two comrades, was left free to work without interruption.

He gained the side verandah of trellis work, and choosing a spot that was cast into the shadow by a group of trees hard by, he and his men succeeded in gaining the roof of the porch unobserved, in silence. He did not hesitate, having well informed himself of all that was necessary beforehand, and quickly pried open one of the shutters that were at the window.

Just then the volley rung out from the garrison below, and with an unuttered curse he saw that they had been betrayed. Still he did not retract, but dashed in the window with a powerful thrust of his foot, and leaped into the apartment, closely followed by his comrades.

There was a lamp burning upon the table in the center of the room, and by the light he saw all that was essential. At the further side of the room two women were cowering in great affright, apparently too greatly alarmed to raise any outcry.

"Grab the nigger wench, boys, while I 'tend to our fire lady," muttered Keedy, as he sprung forward and grasped Ada, placing one hand over her mouth to stifle any outcry she might attempt.

The mulatto maid was quickly thrown and held by one of the men, while the other securely bound and gagged her. Then they began rummaging around the room to appropriate any little article of value they might chance upon, for they knew by the uproar out in the grounds that their comrades met with a reverse, and that this was probably the only chance they would have.

In the mean time Mat Keedy had no particular difficulty with Ada, for she had fainted away when she realized that

she was in the power of the man whom she dreaded above all others, and who had bitterly vowed to be revenged upon her for scorning his suit.

"Come, the sooner we are away from here the better, or we may be trapped, and if we are, it's all night with us then. One of you get down first to take the girl, and then it must be a break for the horses," he hastily ordered.

"Yes, I don't guess it's overly healthy round hyar, an' the farther we git the easier my neck 'll feel," grunted one of the outlaws, as he obeyed his leader's orders.

Ada was quickly lowered to the ground and then Keedy led the way with her in his arms, choosing a course back of the negro quarters, where he then could gain the road under cover of the trees. In this he succeeded, and in five minutes more the quartette were mounted upon their horses and galloping swiftly away from the grounds, without pausing to ascertain the fate of their comrades.

The cause of the shrieks that had so startled the young partisan and Laffin was this:

Owing to the haste with which she had been bound, Kitty, Ada's mulatto waiting-maid, by dint of much tugging and straining had managed to free her hands from the cord that had secured them, although the skin was considerably lacerated by the process. Then it was but the work of a moment to pluck the gag from her mouth.

After a few noiseless gasps she managed to gain sufficient breath to scream, which she then kept up with a vigor that spoke well for the soundness of her lungs. The outcry was heard by Martin Sollars, who had very prudently remained behind when the charge was made after the disconfited outlaws.

He knew that the sound proceeded from his daughter's chamber, and forgetting all fear, he rushed up-stairs and burst open the door, not pausing to turn the latch. Had he seen an enemy then, he would have fared but ill, for with all his faults the old man loved his child, almost idolized her, and would not have paused to calculate the danger.

He saw a woman's form rolling to and fro upon the floor, uttering piercing shrieks, and rushing forward he grasped her by the dress, half believing it was Ada. But as he saw his

mistake he set up a most vociferous tirade of cursing and questions, intermingling them in such a manner that an uninterested person would have roared with laughter.

The more he raved and stamped, the louder and shriller did Kitty scream, as if determined not to be overdone; and it is doubtful when it would have ended, but for the abrupt entrance of the young partisan, looking bewildered and half-crazed with apprehension.

"Mr. Sollars, uncle, what is the meaning of all this?" stammered Sloan.

"Ask her; I don't know! Confound you, you yellow nap o' darkness, where's Ada—where is my daughter?" roared the old man, stamping first with one foot and then with the other, almost bursting with rage and apprehension.

"Kitty, Kitty, do you hear—where's your mistress?" urged Sloan, stooping over the maid, and shaking her by the arm.

"Oh, oh, don't, for the bressed Mas'r—"

"Let me wake her up, Cap'n Jim," interrupted Lavin, as he stepped forward with the great washbowl full of water.

Setting it down upon the floor he grasped the maid's girl around the waist, securing her arms, and then plunged her head into the water. Then laying her down he drew his knife, and holding it up before her eyes, said in a plain, distinctive voice:

"Now, kinky-head, you're mighty good-looking for a nigger, and I should hate orfally to spile them 'ar features, but if you don't wake up and tell us whar your mistress is, right out flat-footed, blammed if I don't snipe off that 'ar nose and them lips fer griddle-greasers!"

"Oh, Lord, mas'r, don't, an' I'll tell all I know!"

"Kitty, you know me," interrupted the young partisan. "Tell me where your mistress is?"

"Bress de Lord, mas'r Sloan, it am you fo' such! Den her's done gone?" she exclaimed, sitting up.

"Yes, yes; who do you mean?"

"W'y, dat cussed fannily Mat Keely—"

"My God! then she is in his power!" groaned Sloan.

"But which way did they go?—quick!"

"Frough de winder, dar."

"Come, uncle—Dick, to home; we may save her yet,"

exclaimed Sloan, leaping out of the window, followed by Laffin, while the old man preferred the easier exit by the door.

As he ran toward the stables, Sloan blew shrill, continuous blasts upon his whistle, hoping thus to recall some of his men. Martin Sollars, in his haste, stumbled and fell down-stairs, seriously spraining his leg, and in the dire confusion that prevailed, he lay there helplessly, groaning for assistance.

Sloan and Laffin hurriedly saddled a horse apiece, and while thus occupied several men came in, having heard the signal. They began equipping the horses, while the young partisan continued to sound his call. In ten minutes the larger portion of his men had returned, and were in the saddle.

Just as they rode out of the stable-yard, Colonel De Forrest came up, and in a few hurried words Sloan acquainted him with the fact of Ada's abduction, and implored him to collect his men, and scour the country for the missing maiden. Then he dashed down the avenue at the head of his men, and entered the open road.

"Laffin, where do you think he will have gone first?" he asked, as the squatter rode up alongside.

"If not to the rendezvous, then it beats me. You see, the country will be too hot for him arter this, an' he knows it. But he won't dar' to travel alone, 'cause thar's no knowin' who he might meet. In co'se the boys will go thar, an' so will he, to meet 'em, when they'll make tracks for some other hole."

"Then lead the way and we'll follow," cried Sloan, impatiently.

"Keep clus up an' look out alongside o' the road," added Laffin, as he urged his horse ahead.

The road was amply wide enough for two to ride abreast, and the lover once more pressed alongside.

"But why do you think he will leave the island, if it is as well hidden as you told me? Why won't he stay there to let the storm blow over?" he inquired.

"Well, I'll tell you," slowly responded Dick. "You see he knows that thar's kin some stockin' did lyar. In co'se it don't stand to reason that such a braid' o' fillers would all be up an' ready for 'em, if thar plans hedn't kin blowed on. Thet's a dead open an' shet."

"Yes?"

"Yas. Then ef one part o' it was blowed by one o' the gang—in' he'll know it *nowt* ha' bin one o' them, 'cause no one else could 'a' knowed about it—why so would the other be, an' that afore many hours the soldiers would be downing the rendezvous to make a clean sweep o' the job. Dye see?"

"I believe you are right, Dick; and now the faster we travel the better. *She* mustn't stay with the black-hearted hound long."

"Oh, 's fur's that's consarned, she's all right fer to night. He'll hev plenty to 'tend to in savin' his own hide, an' won't eat up any o' his didoes, afore another night anyhow. An' afore then I consait he'll be keepin' his master comp'ny, whar he won't hev no need o' extra clothes in the winter-time," grimly added Dick.

They pressed forward as rapidly as was consistent with safety, keeping a good watch along the road as far as was practicable under the circumstances; but without seeing or hearing the ones they were searching for. At length Dick announced their arrival in the vicinity of the island upon which stood the hidden house, in a low voice to *Slam*, and at his direction the party slackened their pace to a walk, lest the trampling of hoofs or splashing in the mud should alarm the game.

"Now, Cap'n Jim, you keep your fellers quiet an' on the lookout, while I go ahead to reconnoiter like, an' I arn ef there's anybody at the shanty we want," said Squatter Dick, as he dismounted and resigned his rifle to the young partisan.

"But let me go with you," said *Slam*.

"'Twon't do. You don't know the way, an' would only jist make trouble. One's a-plenty, 'cause it's only jist sneakin', not fightin'. Wait hyar until I come," as he crouching forward, the swamp-scout disappeared like a shadow.

He struck off to the right, taking a roundabout course, as he did not contemplate crossing the fallen tree-trunk, for he well knew that, were the island occupied, this point would be watched, and he was by no means assured that the part he had played in the night's events was not suspected. And if it was, the first charge brought against him would be the contents of a musket or the keen point of a long knife.

It would be plain that they had been betrayed, from the deadly reception they had met with, and as Dick Latlin was the scout or spy last seen in the neighborhood, and the one who arrested them and was right at the mansion, upon his shoulders the suspicions must fall. Hence he did not care to risk a meeting.

He steadily skirted the pond until he arrived near the point where he had swam it when he struck his first blow for vengeance, and gliding silently along upon his belly, he entered the still, stagnant water. Turning upon his back, only allowing a slight portion of his face to appear above the surface, and using his limbs slowly beneath him, he floated across in such skillful silence that had an enemy been within arm's length, he would not have heard a ripple.

Latlin had aimed his course so as to strike the island at a point where a clump of bushes overhang the water, and preserved such a straight line that he landed in their shadow. Carelessly turning over, he passed and listened intently.

All was silent, save the usual summer noises; the chirruping of insects, the deep bass or shrill rattle of frogs, and the rustling whispering of the wind among the tree-tops. These he heard, but nothing more serious. It seemed as though the island was totally deserted.

But he was far too good a swamp-scout to run any risk carelessly, or to take a step before well-assured as to its results. Drawing his knife he slowly crawled from the water, and keeping close in the deep shade, proceeded toward the log-house, thoroughly examining every inch of the ground before and around him.

In this manner he proceeded until he reached the rear of the building, where he peered through the chink. All was darkness and silence within. Crouching down and placing an ear to the aperture, he listened intently for a moment, but without any immediate result.

Then he started. The sound of a faint groan met his ear. A groan, low and hollow, but full of deadly agony. It was no strain. He well knew that such a groan could not be uttered; that it was the gaspings of one who was bent upon death, and whose life was ebbing rapidly out.

Still he remained motionless, listening with all his acuteness.

My God! will no one come? Must I die here like a dog without a drop of water to quench this raging thirst? Are they all dead, or have they fled far away and left me here to die a dog's death?"

The scout heard the words uttered in a weak, broken voice of the most intense agony, and thought that he recognized the speaker. Still he would not be precipitate, although fully assured that the sufferer was alone in the hut. But he did not know how many more might be concealed around the building.

Again the voice was heard, and he could wait no longer. The prayers of the sufferer moved him to pity, and he resolved to enter the house and offer him the beverage he so craved. A canteen hung at his side, partially filled with water, and within his breast he had a small flask of brandy.

Gliding around to the door he found it ajar, and slipping through the aperture he gently closed and barred it. But the ear of the wounded man caught the noise, slight as it was, and he called out in a faint, quavering voice:

"Who are you?"

"A friend, I consait. Is that you, Carver?" whispered Laffin.

"Yes; what there is left of me. But if you are a friend, for God's sake give me some drink! My throat is burning up!"

"Easy, old feller; don't make no noise. That's no tellin' who's around," cautioned the squatter. "Hyar is water, an' a drap o' branly, ef so be I can find you."

"Here, here—the water! Hasten—oh, quick!"

"That you is," he said, holding the canteen to the man's lips; then, as he drained the vessel and sunk back with a heartfelt sigh of relief, Dick added: "How did you git this far, an' whar's the cap'n?"

"I was hurt at the house, but the death-blow I got as I was a mile or so from here. Some one shot—me. I don't know where—he— Oh! my God!" muttered Carver, and as he uttered the last words he rolled partially over, and the horrible death-rattle sounded through the stillness of the room.

Laffin felt for the man's heart, but it had ceased to beat, and he withdrew his hand with a shudder, lastly wiping it upon his clothes. The outlaw was dead.

After making a thorough search upon the island without any farther discoveries, Laffin lightly ran across the bridge and hastened to where Sloan was impatiently awaiting his return. Making known his presence by a signal that the younger person recognized, he then hastily detailed the result of his scout.

"And now, what must be done?" despondently asked Sloan.

"Nottin' much, till day comes. We'd better stay hyar till then; an' we may catch 'em yit. P'raps we've passed 'em on the rock, an' ef so they'll be hyar purty soon. String the men out an' tell 'em of they see anybody to halt 'em, an' onless they gives the word Washington, why then shoot or capter 'em," returned the squatter, after a moment's thought.

CHAPTER IX.

ADA'S ADVENTURES.

WHEN Ada Sellers recovered from her swoon, for a moment she was sadly bewildered and knew not where she was. But then it all came back to her; how she had been seized and bound, by the man who had had the impudence to solicit her hand.

From the splashing of the horses' feet, as well as the cold, damp air, she knew they were in the swamp, although, owing to the position in which she was held, nothing could be seen but the tree-tops overhead, and an occasional glimpse of the starry dome far above, through little rifts in the interlacing mass of boughs. She remained motionless and did not struggle, for such of course would avail nothing unless to farther enrage the brute who held her.

But her mind was now clear and her brain in active play. Naturally proud and high-spirited, she was also quick witted, and her present danger rendered her doubly so. Every moment was dangerous that she remained in the power of such a person, and she determined to escape; but in what manner, she left the moment of action to determine.

Ada cautiously worked her hands back and forth in the handkerchief with which they had been bound, and to her great exultation found that with but little difficulty it could be slipped off, owing to the haste in which Keedy had knotted it, at the mansion. The motion of the horse that was going at a fast canter, prevented her efforts being discovered by her abductor.

As her hand became freed it struck against some cold, hard object, and to her joy she found that it was the handle of the outlaw's knife. This discovery suggested a plan to her, so wild and desperate that under ordinary circumstances she would have shrunk from it in horror.

Ada listened intently. At a little distance ahead of them rode the two outlaws who had assisted Keedy in the abduction. And she thought she could hear shouts and trampling of horses' hoofs behind them in the distance, but was not certain, as the splashing of the three horses now increased.

The road had dwindled down into a mere footpath, and the bushes occasionally would brush them upon either side. Ada tried to remember where they were and in which direction they had come, and thought that she could do so; but the many curves and abrupt turns they had taken in the darkness confused her somewhat.

Her hand closed upon the horn handle of the knife, and to her delight felt it yield readily to her touch. It was loose and would slip from its sheath without difficulty. There was no time to be lost and she determined to risk the attempt.

Gathering all her energies, Ada plucked the long blade from the outlaw's belt, and plunged it with all her force into the man's side; then, as his arms relaxed their hold, and he uttered a sharp cry of mingled surprise and pain, the maiden leaped to the ground.

The outlaw's horse was frightened by the sudden movement, and plunged ahead with a snort of terror, almost unseating its rider. Ada stooped and quickly severed the cord that secured her ankles, with the knife she still held, and then darted away into the gloomy recesses of the swamp through mire and water, intent only upon escaping from her brutal enemy.

With a frightful volley of imprecations, M.: Keedy finally

turned his horse's head, and in the extremity of his rage, fired a pistol-shot in the direction taken by Ada. The missile, though discharged at random, hissed so close to the fugitive's ear that she started aside and fell, close to the root of a dense clump of bushes where the liquid mud half-covered her form.

She heard the oaths of the bandits as they left the road and plunged into the swamp in pursuit, and with intuitive cunning she crouched still closer to the ground. Her clothes were dark and rendered more so by the mud, and in her position there was little risk of discovery, unless they should chance right upon her. While, had she continued her flight, there was little doubt but what she would have been betrayed by the noise that could not have been avoided.

The pursuers pressed when almost against her, and for a moment the maiden thought her covert was suspected, but fortunately she made no motion. Then a slight splashing noise was heard at some little distance ahead, at which Kedy shouted:

"There she is, boys, come on! One hundred dollars to the man that catches her!" and the trio darted off in the direction of the noise.

Then Ada arose and cautiously retraced her steps. She knew that the outlaws' horses had been left behind in the path, and it was her intention to self-appropriate one for her own use, and then turn the others loose.

But in this she was foiled, for the horses had been simply hitched together by the bridles, and as she emerged almost directly beneath their noses, they gave a mingled snort of alarm and then dashed wildly off into the darkness. For a moment she felt discouraged, but throwing off this feeling with an effort, she listened intently.

The sounds of the horses' hoofs had nearly died away, but she could still hear the shouts and cries of the outlaws. Then Ada slowly entered the swamp and fled away from the spot as rapidly as lay in her power. She did not dare come back in the path, at present, for she knew not how soon it would be scented by those who were hunting her, but kept, as near as she could judge, in a parallel course with it.

The sounds made by her pursuers rapidly died away, and hope once more sprung up in her heart. In a few moments she was terribly frightened by the noise made by several horsemen as they floundered through the swamp within a dozen yards of her; so close, in fact, that the mud cast up by their hoofs bespattered her. She thought it was more of the outlaw band.

Poor girl! If she had only known who they really were, her trials would have been at an end, and how much anguish and bitter despair she would have been spared. But it was not so ordained, and the noise gradually died away. Colonel De Ferrest and his two companions passed by, neither party being aware by what a slight chance their hopes had been defeated.

Once more Ada toiled on, through the mud and waters, at times nearly waist-deep, but still her spirit was undaunted and she did not despair. On this, for perhaps half an hour, when she thought the bandits were left far enough behind for her to incur no danger in returning to the road, where it would be easier traveling, and at the same time a sure guide by which to lead her home again.

Turning in the direction, as she thought, necessary to reach it, Ada toiled on, expecting at every moment to feel the firm ground beneath her feet. On, on, until her wearied limbs almost sunk beneath her, and she could, with the utmost difficulty, extricate them from the clinging mire; yet, still she was disappointed. There were no signs of the road.

Pausing for a moment to think, the maiden changed her course slightly, diverging to the left, and again pressed on. But in vain. There was no road!

And at length she was forced to believe that she had erred; and that she knew not which way to turn. That she was lost in the depths of the vast and terrible swamp!

Can you comprehend the meaning of this? Lost in the great swamp?

Where one's companions are the alligator, the many deadly species of snakes, and other swamp inhabitants—the most innocent being far from harmless, the raven as well as the thirsty mosquito. To go on, tramping through the thick mire and slush, fearing to pause lest you should sink from sight for

ever, beneath the treacherous soil; yet, not knowing into what danger your next step may plunge you; perhaps in contact with one of the deadly serpents or saurians, all the more terrible from the darkness in which you grope. Afraid to pause upon any knoll or half-decayed log, from dread lest it, too, should be the resort of the venomous reptiles.

Ah, it was a sad, sad night for poor Ada!

She staggered on, fearing to pause for more than a moment at a time, hoping against hope, praying that she might regain the lost path; the only clue by which she might hope to regain safety. Sometimes going in a direct line, at others in a zigzag course or toiling on in an irregular circle, until at length she sank down in utter despair, and giving way, for the first time, she wept and raved in incoherent delirium.

But this soon passed away, and she breathed a prayer to the Most High, and arose again, strengthened in body and in spirit. It would be worse than folly to remain where she was.

For a short time Ada kept on, and then, as she came upon a little knoll rising above the level of the swamp, she determined to remain upon it until morning.

Pressing at the edge, Ada began thrashing around with the stick she had used to assist her steps, shouting out strange noises, to drive away any snakes or animals that might be upon the little mound. One or two sullen hisses and the still rattle showed the maiden how needful were these precautions, but she would not retreat.

Carefully going over the entire mound, beating every inch of it with her weapon, and striking in the mud and water around its edges, Ada bore up bravely until fully assured that there was nothing harmful left upon the island, although every step she took was torturing, the exquisite pain shooting through her limbs being almost more than she could bear.

Then she was about to cast herself down to seek the repose so greatly needed, when suddenly she paused, with a look of despair. What was to prevent the reptiles from returning to the knoll as soon as silence was restored, and if she was found there, what would be her fate? A shudder crept over her as the answer stood out plainly before her mind's eye.

It would be *death*—death the most horrible; death by poison! And yet she could go no further. Nature was already overtaken, and Ada felt the drowsiness of sleep stealing upon her, and benumbing her faculties of mind as well as body. Arousing herself with an effort, she staggered to one side, and was only saved from falling to the ground by the trunk of a small tree.

A gleam of hope inspired her, and extending her arm she found that she could reach the lower limbs. This was it, then. She would rest until daylight came, in its limbs. Fearing to wait longer, Ada fastened her staff to her waist with her belt, and then, with strength augmented by the peril of her situation, she caught the limbs of the little tree, and managed to drag herself to a secure perch in its middle.

Dreading lest, in her sleep, she should fall to the ground, Ada, by elongating her belt, wound it around both her waist and a stout limb, and then securely fastened it. Then, worn out by the trials and fatigue she had undergone, no sooner was this precaution accomplished than she dropped off into a deep slumber or stupor.

The tree in which she was ensconced, was not very large, but growing in a clear space upon the little mound, its limbs were long and strong. The place she occupied was close to the main stem, and some ten feet from the ground.

For hours her stupor lasted. The sun arose and the little hillock was lighted up by its warm rays, pouring down through an opening or rift in the limbs overhead. The sun rolled higher, until it was near the meridian before Ada awoke.

When she did so it was with a sudden start and premonition of danger. There was a strange, musky odor saluting her nostrils that almost overpowered her. Then, as she stared wildly around her, in momentary forgetfulness of where she was and what had occurred during the past horrible night, her eyes rested upon the mound below her feet.

Ada uttered a loud cry of terror, and shrank convulsively back. Had it not been for her precaution in binding herself to the tree, she must have fallen; fallen to the ground, and then what would have been her fate? Ah, it needed no prophet to foretell that.

On the side of the lillock lay stretched the dark, slimy form of an alligator, with half of its body submerged in the liquid mud, where its tail was slowly moving to and fro, sending the little waves curling upon either side. That the reptile was aware of her presence, Ada could not doubt, for its cruel, fishy eyes were fixed upon her, while its huge jaw slowly rose and fell, as if in eager anticipation of the tempting morsel that looked ready to fall into its mouth.

There were other objects there, scarcely less to be dreaded, if not quite so hideous as the gigantic saurian, coiled up in pyramids or slowly gliding to and fro. Snakes of all sizes and colors, from one foot long to those as thick as a strong man's arm. No wonder that the maiden closed her eyes, with a convulsive shudder.

But not for long were they closed; a strange, hissing noise rang in her ears, coming, too, from overhead. Quickly glancing up, Ada beheld the object that alarmed her—a large, terrible-looking snake, coiled around a branch of the tree, not much over a yard distant from her face.

Arduous would she have fallen, but for the belt, but recovering her self-possession, she fixed her eyes upon the serpent, while her hand mechanically sought the staff that she had taken up with her the preceding night. It was still secured at her waist, and with as little motion as possible, Ada slipped it from her belt. There was no time to lose, for the snake now began slowly to advance along the limb, with its head erected a foot in the air.

It appeared puzzled at its unwonted companion, and moved but slowly. When Ada noiselessly drew up the stick, it paused, as if in doubt, and as the maiden's hand reached the lower end, she dealt a sudden, powerful stroke, so well aimed that the serpent was hurled from its perch down into the water, where, as it writhed furiously, it was soon surrounded by a dozen of its congeners.

Then Ada raised her voice and screamed, as long and as loudly as lay in her power, for help. At the first cry, the alligator plunged back into the swamp, and Ada thought it had been forgiven. But, as she continued her shrieks, it slowly swam back until at length it once more resumed its old position.

For nearly an hour Ada kept up the outcry, with brief intervals for breath, without any other answer than the echoes of her own voice and the usual sounds of the swamp. But for all that, help was near. Better far for her had she remained silent, than to be the means of bringing unto her the person she did.

The fringe of bushes was pushed aside, and a black face peered out from the leafy screen. Its large goggle eyes quickly fell upon the form of Ada, as she cried aloud, and the hideous features expanded in a fiendish grin of delight. Then it as silently withdrew, and cautiously began circling around the island, keeping concealed from the maiden's view. Then, as if assured that there was no danger to be apprehended, the negro once more paused, and the sun's rays fell upon a rusty gun as it was leveled at the alligator.

The report came, with a dull, heavy roar, and the huge reptile gave a few convulsive thunders, and then lay motionless, with the blood streaming from the death-wound behind its shoulder. Ada uttered a cry of delight, although she saw nothing of her rescuer, and in her joy at feeling herself saved, fainted away.

The negro now came forward, and as the maiden did not answer to his calls, he mounted the lower branches, and severing the belt, lowered Ada to the ground. Then, after reloading his musket, he picked up the senseless girl and strode rapidly off through the swamp, chuckling horribly to himself, or occasionally bursting out into a wild laugh.

He did not pause, but proceeded rapidly along for nearly a mile, when he reached a sort of island that rose in the midst of the swamp, thickly fringed with bushes around the outside edge. Pressing through these he soon reached a rude sort of hut, formed with limbs and lashes entwined among some young trees, and roughly thatched over. Into this he entered, and laid Ada down upon a pile of leaves, covered with an old and ragged blanket, and then crouched by her side, gloating over her beauty.

He was a tall, spare negro, with a hideously exaggerated set of features, that did not appear human, and which would have shamed a gorilla. He was naked from his waist up, and had on only a coarse pair of pants, plantation cloth, and

thick leggings of bark, with a nondescript covering for his feet, that defied description, owing to the thick coating of mud upon them. An ugly scar crossed his face, one extremity ending where his left eye should be, it having evidently been put out by the same blow that had still further disfigured him.

CHAPTER X.

THE FINAL ACT.

THE young partisan leader, seeing no better course to pursue than that suggested by Laffin, concluded to remain in his present position until daylight, if nothing occurred before that time. He knew that, did he ride around searching for his game, the noise necessarily made by the party would be sure to alarm them, who would then have no difficulty in chasing the rangers. Besides, it was very likely that some of the band would return to the rendezvous, from whom he might learn something definite regarding Mat Keedy.

But it was not in Laffin's nature to remain apparently idle while his prey was afoot, and so he told Sloan that he would take a little scout. The young partisan would have remonstrated had he thought it would have been of any use. But from the low, dogged tone it was plain that the sand lapper had resolved to go, and nothing short of downright force would prevent him.

There were other men with the party who were equally as much at home in the swamp as Dick, if not quite so expert, and two who were well versed in that particular region. So he felt less hesitation at parting company.

Laffin managed to exchange his horse for a diminutive swamp-terky, one of that breed that seem half amphibious and can almost skim over the surface of lof, where a man, unaided to the soil, would mire. Then he parted from the rangers without a word or nod.

It is not our purpose to follow his wanderings throughout that night, for he accomplished nothing toward the object of

his search. Indeed he scarcely expected to accomplish any thing before the light of day should come to assist him, but the voice within his breast, crying for vengeance, would not allow him to rest.

The sun was nearly an hour high, and Laffin was about returning to the place where he had left the rangers, hoping that they had learned something since his departure, when a voice startled him.

"Helloa, Dick, is that you? I hardly knew you, and have had you covered with my rifle for the last five minutes."

"Who are *you*? come out o' the bush an' show yourself," rejoined the squatter as he recovered from his surprise.

A man parted the bushes and stepped out in full view, and Laffin then saw, to his great delight, that it was one of the outlaws who had left the main body to accompany Mat Keedy just before the attack. It was evident by his manner that he had no suspicion of the part played by Dick in the affair at the mansion, and taking his cue from that, Laffin proceeded to pump the man, hoping to learn something definite regarding the present whereabouts of both his enemy and Ada Sollars.

"Rough times, last night, Dick," added the outlaw, as he stood beside the pony. "You were lucky to get out of it with a whole hide."

"You, too; I don't see no hurts."

"No, I'm sound enough as far as that's concerned. You know I didn't stay with you."

"I see'd you go off with the cap'n, an' didn't know what to make of it. Some o' the boys talks purty hard ag'in' yer fellers; the softest words they use is *cowards*," said Laffin, in a pointed tone.

"Cowards be ——" hotly exclaimed the man. "Who says so? Tell me their names and I'll show them if Jack Wapper is a coward! Who are they?"

"Easy, old fellow, easy. Don't fly off the han'le all to once. But, ef you'll jest think a leetle, you'll see that they hed some cause fer bein' sp'icious-like. You three went off, nobody knowed whar, an' wasn't see'd ag'in through the whole mornin'. What else *could* they think?"

"And if we did, whose fault was it? Don't the laws of the band say that the captain must be obeyed in *every thing*,

without any questions being asked? For my part, I'd enough sight rather be where tough knocks is going on, than to act as a woman-stealer. But if the captain says 'You come with me,' what can I do?" argued Wapper, earnestly.

"That's what I told 'em. That no doubt you'd good reasons, but they didn't 'pear to b'lieve me. So you did get the gal, eh?" asked Laffin, with well-assumed nonchalance.

"Yes, we got her safe enough, but what's the use? Mat Keedy promised us big pay if we'd help him get her safe to the rendezvous, but just as we were congratulating ourselves upon making a good thing out of a bad night, after all, why the wench up and gave us the go-by."

"How so?" queried Laffin, his voice slightly trembling, despite his efforts to appear unconcerned.

Then Jack Wopper gave a succinct account of the abduction and subsequent escape of Ada, adding:

"It was well carried out, and I glory in the gal's spunk, although she did knock me out of a nice nest-egg. Keedy will have cause to remember her as long as he lives, for she let a hole into his side that you could almost run your hand in. He was too mad to feel it then, much, but if it don't lay him on his back before long, then I miss my guess. A couple o' inches higher, and he'd never 'a' kicked!"

"What is he now?"

"Somewhere near here, on the hunt. I believe the man's crazy in real earnest, after that gal. He swears he'll hunt until he finds her, if it's a month from now, and I just believe he's mad enough to do it, too. Thornton and I are on the same lay, but unless I make a strike soon, I'm going to light out from this part of the country. The band is played out, and the whole swamp is overrun with red-coats and rangers, after those that are left."

"That so?"

"You bet ye! And if you'll take a fool's advice, Dick, you'll be making yourself scarce in these parts before long."

"Might I, Jack, but I must find the cap'n first. Then I'll travel. Which way would I be most likely to strike him?"

"I don't know; but, beat around here, sort o', and unless the cut he got last night has throwed him, you'll be apt to light on him soon."

"Thank you; 've you got any word to send him?"

"Only that I've struck a bee-line for the army. 'Twon't do to stay here no longer, now that business is spoilt."

"I'll tell him. Good luck to ye, any how."

"Same. Hope you'll find him all right."

"*So do I*," and then the two parted.

For a moment Laffin hesitated whether or not to hasten and give Sloan the information he had picked up, but then the vision of his hated enemy came up before him, and knowing that he was so near at hand, Dick determined to hunt him out first.

Cautiously riding through the swamp in an irregular circle, Laffin closely scrutinized every object or spot where it was possible for a man to conceal himself; at times swimming his pony through pools of stagnant water, with his rifle in readiness for an instant shot, should such a course prove necessary.

Suddenly his eyes flashed anew, and a half-mothered start broke from his lips as he plunged his heels in the pony's sides until it sprung forward with a smart of pain and alarm. There before him, half reclining against a tree, was the form of his hated enemy, Matthew Keedy.

Through the mud and slime that covered his person, Laffin could see the dark-red stains where the life-blood had oozed from beneath the rude bandage he had applied to the wound dealt by Ada. There was a ghastly-pale tinge to his swarthy visage that told how acutely he must have suffered, but the sight of this did not excite any feeling of commiseration in the heart of his enemy.

"Ah-ha! at last, Mat Keedy!" hissed Laffin, as he drew up beside the outlaw leader, the mud cast up by his pony's feet plentifully bespattering the astonished man.

"Ah, Laffin, that you? You half scared me. I am glad to see you," faintly replied the outlaw, with an uneasy air, closely eying the squatter.

"Scared you, did I? Do you think that you've any call to be 'larmed at the sight o' me?"

"Of course not—why should I?" faltered Keedy, one hand dropping to his belt.

"Look hyer, Mat Keedy; I'm a quiet man an' you know it. I don't talk much but what I do say is sworn to. You've a c'd me shoot, an' when I tell you that thar's a ballit in this

ere rifle-bar'l as rests mighty oneasy, mebbe you'll think twic't afore you titch that thar pistol. It mought be onhealthy-like, you know."

"Why, Dick, what do you mean? Why should you talk to me in that way?" queried Keedy, his eyes roving restlessly about him.

"You'd like to know, would ye? Wal, I al'ays was 'commolatin' an' I don't mind ef I do tell you, bein' as we're goin' to keep comp'ny for a spell. But fust, you see this string?" at the same time drawing a stout cord from his pocket. "Thar's a little story connected with it, too, that I'll tell you by-'n'-by."

"I don't understand you," faltered the outlaw leader, anxiously.

"You will afore long. This means that you're my pris'ner, an'—"

"Thornton, shoot him! he betrayed us all last night!" yelled Keedy, in a loud tone, at the same time gliding around the body of the tree.

Laffin turned his head quickly, and instinctively bent low down in the saddle, thus raising his rifle, for as he did so, a rifle cracked and the hum of a bullet sounded unpleasantly close above his head. He saw the form of a man standing at a little distance with a rifle still at his shoulder, while the smoke coming from the muzzle plainly told from whence had proceeded the sudden shot.

Quick as thought the scout's rifle rose to his cheek, and before Bill Thornton could dodge behind cover, the report rung out, and with a wild, thrilling yell, the outlaw sprung into the air, falling headlong to the ground, a dead man.

Almost simultaneously a report sounded from close behind Laffin, and a sharp twinge between his shoulders told him that he was wounded. Then he wrenched his pony's head around to behold Mr. Keedy drop his useless pistol, and flee through the swamp.

Laffin urged his pony after the fugitive, and as he gained rapidly upon him, the heavy rifle-barrel was swung aloft and then descended with fearful force upon Keedy's right shoulder, hurling him headlong as if he had been shot. In a few moments the lawless outlaw was securely bound, hand and foot

and then Laffin examined, as well as he was able, the wound he had received.

It had been well intended, but the bullet had glanced from his shoulder-blade, inflicting a painful flesh-wound, but nothing serious, unless from loss of blood. Tearing away the clothes, he managed to press a pellet of moss into the orifice, that in a measure checked the hemorrhage.

After reloading his rifle, Laffin went over to where lay the body of Bill Thornton. Turning it over with his feet, he saw that his bullet had entered just below the rim of the ragged hat, piercing his brain and killing him instantly. Although he knew that the outlaw deserved his fate, a shudder ran over Laffin's frame as he realized how completely the last few weeks had changed his nature.

But then he thought of what had been the cause, and his heart steeled itself to complete his task of vengeance.

Returning to the still insensible outlaw leader, Laffin contrived to lift him into the saddle and bind him in such a manner that he could not fall off, while he retained an erect position. Then leading the pony by the halter, Dick set out at a rapid pace, as though his plans were fully settled.

In a short time Keedy recovered his senses, and after a few moments' wildly staring around him, his eyes dwelt upon the form of his captor, as he spoke:

"What does this mean, Laffin? What have I ever done to you that I should meet with this treatment?"

"Oh-ho! you're awake, are you? I'm glad of that, 'cause I want to talk a little with you, afore I end this," returned Laffin, falling back until side by side with his captive.

"So you want to know what this means, an' what you've done to deserve it, do ye? Then you don't call it nothin' to tell a feller to shoot me, 'sides tryin' it on yourself, eh?"

"But you acted so strange; calling me your prisoner, an' all that," faltered Keedy.

"An' so you are. But I'll let you into the secret, so't you can sorter prepare yourself for that what is aheadin'. Fact, you must know that it was me, 'Squatter Dick, the swab-picker,' that smelt out your rendezvous on the island, an' wiped out the watch as was hid on the tree. Then I plugged your brother Mark, an' writ them words.

"My next move was to play the drunken Dutchman to green Luke Keely, an' then I settled him. Thet is the story as is connected with thet 'ar cord as you've got on now. It was used to bind him afore I rubbed him out. Then last night I led you fellers into an' andbush; I got Jim Sloan's boys into Sallers' house, an' told em' you was a-comin'.

"You know that the Black Band was then played out, but you don't know that I he'd a tale with your *last brother*, Seth Keely, an' I ft him layin' thar, with the moon a shinin' down on the hole in his breast, as let the life out."

Keely gave a deep groan, and a convulsive shudder ran over his frame. A gleam of vindictive joy flashed from the avenger's eyes as he observed this, and then he continued:

"Thet's it! Green an' trimble an' shiver, 'cause the end is nigh! You're the last, an' your hours on airth is numbered. Afore the sun is overhead you will hev drawed your last breath of life, an' my job will be done!

"Do you ax why I've hunted you fellers down so mercilessly? Let your thoughts go back to a day when you did a hellish deed—when you siled your hands an' hearts by a deed so black that a nigger is snow beside ye—when you killed two poor lone women, shot my dog, the bestest one in the whole State, an' burnt down my shanty? Go back to thet, an' then say ef I he'd it good cause to swar vengeance agin' you four!

"Well, it's almost finished now, an' I'm glad, 'cause thar's somethin' that tells me my days up hyer on airth is most played out, an' the good Lord knows that I don't car' overly much about livin' any longer. You fellers hev made a devil o' me, an' I sware I'll hev to pay for it, hyararter. My hands is kivered with red blood an' my sleep o' nights is haunted with the sperrits of them as I've rubbed out!"

For some time the squatter proceeded in silence, leading the party bearing the almost senseless outlaw. On through the swamp they glided, unleashing the startling plunge of some alligator into the dark, louthsome water, or the sullen hiss of the snake, they started from the hummocks.

"I s'pose you'd like to know what I'm goin' to do with you," at length spoke the squatter. "I might take you to Sloan's rangers, or to Colonel De Forrest. They'd either o' them be glad to spar' you a stretch of hampen rope; but, that wouldn't

suit me. I did sw'ar, at one time, thet I'd sarve you the same as you did poor Pierre Lajoie, my ol' chum an' pardner, but I don't think I'm strong enough now. D'ye 'member?

"How you an' your gang strung him up by the heels, over a slow fire, 'cause he made you some trouble? Thet was the fate I'd 'lowed on gi'in' you, but not now. You 'member the 'McCready Sand?' whar Sam was sucked under? It nart be very comfortin' fer a feller to die thar. He can see death a-crawlin' up inch by inch, as it war, an' then he has time to repent of his sins.

"Thet thought must be consoln' to men like you, who'd need a long time to count over all the diviltry you've did in the course o' your life, an' I 'xpect you'll thank me kindly for bein' so consid'rate, when I mought gi'e you a blue pill. Yas, Mat Keedy, *you're got to die in the quicksand!*"

A wild groan broke from the pallid lips of the horror-stricken outlaw, as the low, calm tones of Laffin pronounced this terrible doom. He had schooled himself to the thought of death, and was prepared to meet it with such firmness as a bold, desperate man might, but such a refinement of cruelty he did not anticipate.

To die inch by inch—to behold death slowly creeping up, as Laffin had said, knowing that every moment brought the end nearer; and yet to be so long in coming! One would suffer a thousand deaths before the terrible, cruel sands dragged him beneath their surface, forever!

In frenzied accents the murderer pleaded for mercy—not for life, but that the avenger would end ail at one blow. He implored the fatal bullet or stroke of the keen knife, as an inestimable boon; but he pleaded to relentless ears and a stony heart. Truly, as Dick had said, they had made a devil of him.

Silent and grim as fate, Laffin strode along with Keedy objectly praying to him, until at length, completely worn out by terror, fatigue, pain and loss of blood, the outlaw's head drooped forward in a swoon. For an instant Laffin dreaded lest he was robbed of his revenge, and anxiously placed his hand over the captive's heart; then, as he felt it faintly throb, he resumed his way with a sigh of relief.

A short time brought him to a road along which he proceeded for a few rods, and then once more wound through the

underbrush. The nature of the soil had changed, and was now hard and firm under foot, of sand and gravel.

Then a small, open tract of ground was reached, comprising an acre or more, through which wound a shallow, sluggish stream. On the edge of this spot Laffin paused and began releasing the still-unconscious outlaw from the saddle.

The swamp tucky appeared very restless and suspicious; his ears thrown back, trembling in every limb and snorting as if in great alarm. His feet were wide spread, and were quickly lifted, one by one, in turn, and cautiously planted, as if the footing was insecure.

And so it was; they were standing upon the edge of a quicksand!

Leaving Keedy still bound hand and foot, although lying upon the ground, Laffin hastened back a few rods in the timber, shortly returning with a stout stick of nearly the thickness of a man's thigh. This he proceeded to plant firmly near the edge of the little stream, shifting his feet rapidly as he did so, to avoid the treacherous clutch of the sands.

Then returning; he dragged Matthew Keedy to the stake, and managed to secure him in a standing position, the numerous cords serving to bind him fast. This done, Laffin retreated to the side of the swamp tucky, and removing his weapons, turned it loose to wander at will.

Then he seated himself upon a decaying chunk of wood, in such a position that he faced his enemy, and resigned himself to patient watching, and gloating over his **feast of vengeance**. A half-stilled snarl of joy oozed from between his tightly-clinched teeth as he saw that the feet of Keedy had already disappeared beneath the shifting surface.

A hair's-breadth at a time, the doomed captive continued to settle in his terrible grave, while yet unconscious of the near approach of death; and glottingly the eyes of the avenger noted every sign that tells of the approach of his long-cherished revenge. Then, with a faint moan and a convulsive shudder, the captive fully raised his head and glanced wildly around him.

"That's it, Keedy, wake up an' see the fun!" hissed Laffin, with a snarl of triumph. "Look around you an' see if you 'member the place." "Tain't bin so long since, that you

can hev forgotten it, seein' you hed so much fun with Lajoie. You didn't think then that you'd die in the same place he did, did you?"

"My God!" shrieked the wretched man, "*it's the quicksand!*"

"Jes' so. An' thar is the tree and the limb whar you fellers strung up poor Lajoie. It's retribution-like, you see. I put you so't the last thing you'd see would be it. Mebbe it'll make you die easier."

"Mercy—have mercy!" cried Keedy, as he vainly strove to lift first one foot and then the other from the mire; *they were buried to the knees!*

"You've found out the meanin' o' thet word a leetle too late, Mat; it won't do you no good now. You never put it out at interest nowhar's, an' so you can't jistly 'xpect it now in your need. Better sober down your thoughts, an' try to prepare fer what comes hereafter, fer yer hours, yas, I mought say yer minutes, on top o' airth is numbered. Judgin' from the way 'at you've bin a-settlin', I calculate that in 'bout one hour you'll gi'e your last breath," said Laffin, slowly, taking a fresh quid of tobacco.

Keedy writhed and struggled to extricate himself, but in vain. Each effort he made only served to bury him deeper in the slowly-shifting sands, and hasten his inevitable fate. Then he raised his voice in a series of wild, piercing shrieks for help, intermingling his prayers with the most hideous blasphemies, until at length he ceased through sheer want of breath.

"Don't stop—go on! I like to hear ye. It's music sweeter'n any thin' 'at I ever heerd, to lis'en to you a-beggin' thet way. But then 'tain't so wise fer you. I reckon that you've short-ned your lease of life just ten minutes, by them didoes," coolly observed Laffin.

The captive did not answer, but his bloodshot eyes rested upon the form of his enemy with a glare of hatred so horrible in its intensity and bitterness that the gaze of Laffin dropped before it. Then a wild, vindictive cry of joy broke from Keedy's lips, sounding so strange that the squatter cast a startled glance around him, as if fearing lest some unexpected chance should snap his cup of revenge from his lips.

"Wal! the man must 'a' gone clean crazy!" he muttered, as, his fears relieved, he glanced once more at his captive.

The latter was grimly smiling, and truly it seemed as if the surmise of Laffin must be correct. Keedy did not speak, nor yet reply to the taunts of the squatter; but only smiled that horrible, vindictive smile.

Suddenly Laffin uttered an oath and gave a wild start. Then Keedy spoke:

"Ah-ha! my friend, you, too, are caught! I may be buried alive, but I will have the company of my dear friend and comrade!"

He spoke the truth. Richard Laffin was caught in the same deadly, remorseless embrace. In his preoccupation he had not noticed that his feet were slowly sinking beneath the surface, and now the clinging sand was above his knees, as he erected his body. He, too, was surely being drawn downward to a terrible death.

"Ha! ha! my friend, where now are your jeers? why don't you laugh and joke? Is it not delightful sport? Ha-ha! men, work faster—with a will! It is for life, do you hear, for life! Tear up the sand—fling it away—like it with your mouth! Ha-ha! Glorious fun! why don't you get loose?" shrieked the half-crazed outlaw, flaming at the mouth, as he railed at the squatter, who was vainly striving to extricate his limbs from the power that was dragging them down—down beneath the surface.

"Well, ef it must be, it must, I s'pose," at length uttered Laffin, as he paused in his exhausting struggles and wiped the streaming perspiration from his brow. "But ef so, you shan't hev no more laugh at me. It don't matter much, n'how, an' I guess I can stand it as well to go under now as at any time hyararter."

"Ha! ha! my chum, why don't you work—why don't you shout and shout for help—that help that never comes! Why don't you beg and plead for mercy?" roared Keedy.

"Course I ain't no coward, that's why. Ef I hev blood upon my soul, it's that what war shed in a holy cause, an' I can die without a tear. But you—I don't wonder you've gone crazy. What for should I wish to live any longer? Ther ain't none o' my kin a-livin', no one who'd drop a tear fer me; you've taken good care o' that."

"My revenge is well-nigh done up. Your brothers is dead

an' gone afore us, an' I'll live long enough to see you die the death o' a dog! . . . Don't you see that?

"I may die, but you'll go fast, an' I'll hev the pleasure o' seein' the sand creep up to your neck, an' then over your chin as you throw back your head an' holler fer help—the help that never comes, as you say. Then it'll creep on an' up, on'til your mouth is shet forever an' your v'ice stilled. As you say—*won't it be fun?*"

"Then, as it slowly shets off the breath o' life from your nostrils, I will be hyar to see your eyes as they roll around an' turn up'ards to plead fer mercy—somethin' that you never did afore—an' then your head 'll droop an' I'll see you *die*! Oh, fer that I would suffer a thousan' deaths!"

"You lie—you lie! You are shorter than I am, and *I* will live to see *you* die, as you say!" yelled Keedy, in a frenzy of despair.

"No, Mat Keedy; you may be smart in some things, but you're out in your calculations now," calmly replied Laffin. "It's true you've got farder to go 'n I hev, but that's two things you don't reckon."

"First, you're a heap heavier nor me, an' then the sick 'll help to drag you down. Next, you're in a heap softer spot 'n I am. So you see you'll go fast; but now you mustn't 'magine that I'm goin' to suffer the torments I've bin tellin' you of, 'cause I ain't."

"The sand 'll close over your head afore it gits up to my neck. You see, I hev a pistil—the same one that you tried to kill me with, not long sence—hyar, an' I'll hold it above ground till *you're* gone, an' then it's on'y a tetch on the trigger that a baby mought gi'e, an' it's all over with. Now do you see whar I've got the deadwood on ye?"

Keedy did not speak, but glared in abject terror at the squatter. Laffin proceeded to deliberately and carefully reload the weapon, almost to the muzzle, putting in a brace of bullets to make doubly sure. Then he cast away his rifle, knife, powder horn and bullet-pouch; every thing whose weight could hasten, by one second, the dreadful fate that awaited him in common with his foe.

Neither spoke, but with stern resignation upon one side and terror upon the other, the moments swiftly fled by, Keedy

was buried to the armpits, while Laffin was fully two inches farther above the surface than that, thus proving the truth of his statement. In one hand he held the carefully-cocked and primed weapon, in readiness to deal the finishing-stroke to his eventful life.

Slowly on and upward the cruel sands crept, until now they closely encircled the throat of the outlaw. The swollen veins stood out upon his temples like whip-cords, and he gasped for breath with his eyes nearly bursting from their sockets. Laffin gazed upon the horrible sight with composed features, a stern, unrelenting smile playing about his thin lips and a fiery gleam in his dark eye.

Higher crept the sands, until they closed forever the mouth of the outlaw leader. His head trembled convulsively, as his nostrils widely dilated to inhale the last breath of life. Then Laffin shouted out:

"Tell Mark an' Seth an' Luke that Squatter Dick sent you to keep 'em company!"

Then the head drooped and the eyes closed with a tremulous quiver. The outlaw leader—the last of the four dreaded brothers—the last of those included in the squatter's oath of vengeance—was dead!

The sand was up to the squatter's neck. His right arm was elevated on high, still clutching the merciful pistol.

A cry for mercy and forgiveness went up on the still air, and then the trigger was drawn.

A loud report, a little cloud of smoke, and then the second head sunk forever beneath the unrelenting sands.

CHAPTER XI.

A DISAGREEABLE TETE-A-TETE.

WE left Ada Sellers in a situation, to say the least, not the most desirable. Senseless and alone, in the power of a grotesquely-hideous negro, who crouched beside her as she lay upon the bed of leaves, gloating over her beauty that was still preeminent, despite the trials and fatigues she had undergone.

Her swoon was of some minutes' duration, when she opened her eyes and sat erect with a convulsive start. For a moment she did not perceive the negro, as her eyes roved wonderingly around the rude hut, in vain trying to recall how she had come there.

But then, as her gaze fell upon the scarred and diabolical-looking face beside her, the change was great. Terror, wonder and disgust was plainly depicted upon her face.

"*You here, Zach. ?*"

"'Ees, mi see tole me true. Zach'ry he hyar, dar, ebery-whar, all de time. Whoo!" cried the negro, flinging his arms wildly aloft, and gritting his teeth together until it made his listener shudder, his one eye rolling frightfully the while; "Zach. am great man now—no whip, no black hole, no ober-seah now! Zach. am king hyar, an' now de proud wite mi-see, she done come hyar to be Crazy Zach's queen. Whoo!"

To say that Ada was not frightfully alarmed, would be exceeding the truth, but she preserved an outwardly-calm demeanor and steady eye, that she fixed full upon that of the negro. She well knew that by these means alone could she hope to escape the dreadful doom that threatened her.

The negro, Zach., or "Crazy Zach.," as he was commonly termed, had belonged to Martin Sollars, and, while young, had been considered one of the most valuable and trustworthy slaves upon the estate.

There was a handsome mulatto girl, a house-servant, with whom he was in love, and they were to have been married during the approaching Christmas holidays, when, one day, for some trifling impertinence, Mr. Sollars ordered her to be whipped. A dozen lashes were administered, with a light hand, for the object was to break her spirit, not to injure her.

But that night she disappeared, in common with Zach., and at early dawn the bloodhounds and negro-hunters were put upon the trail, the former being muzzled. The fugitives had taken to the swamp, and for a time eluded pursuit.

In a pool of water they lay concealed, while all around them the hounds and men were searching for the lost trail. Doubtless they would have escaped, but like a flash a dark form darted through the water, and the wild, piercing shriek that followed told the tale.

An alligator had scented the prey, and making its arrowy rush while the attention of the fugitives was directed to their pursuers, had torn the girl from the arms of her lover. One crunch of its massive jaws, and the deed was done.

With a wild howl, Zach. plunged after the reptile, intent only upon revenge, when he was quickly surrounded by his pursuers. So fierce was his straggles, that one of the men, whom he had slightly injured, dealt him a fearful blow with a stick, that rendered the work of binding him easy.

When life returned, he appeared to be crazy, and in due course of time the ghastly wound cicatrized, and he resumed his labor as a field-hand. For some offense he was sentenced to the lash, and for a day he lay as if dead.

Then, rising up in his frenzy, he drained the guard with his own musket, sought and killed the overseer, and then fled to the swamps. The search that followed this tragedy was long and thorough, but with insane cunning he contrived to elude all snares and baffle all attempts to capture him, until, as time went on, it was believed that he was dead.

There were wild tales narrated among the plantation slaves of the appearance of "Crazy Zach's ghost," and many things were missing, generally just after these visits. In fact, he had lived upon what he could steal from that and the neighboring plantations, with the game he shot or snared in the swamp.

Such, in brief, was the history of the being who now held Ala a captive, and knowing well his wild, ferocious nature, and that his brain was undoubtedly crazed, it is no wonder that Ala was alarmed for her safety. But this latter trait gave her a clue by which she determined to act, hoping thus to escape from his power.

"Surely, Zach., you have not forgotten how kind I used to be to you when you were sick? Didn't I send you nice things to eat and drink?"

"Don't say, but don't so you done arter. Didn't Marse Sellers—your father—didn't he have me tied up an' whipped till I's most dead?"

"No, Zach.," said Ala, deeming it no sin to tell a white lie, under the circumstances, "he didn't know any thing about it until it was all over. Jamison did that without orders, because he was mad at you."

"Whoo! oberseah won't do so no mo', 'ca'se ol' Zach. done killed um; knock um on de head. Now Zach. make queen of w'ite missee, fo' little w'ile, den he gib her to ally-gator fo' eat. Whoo!"

"But my father will be uneasy—will think I am dead?" pleaded Ada. "Please, Zach., take me home, and he'll give you lots of money, and good clothes to wear."

"Now Zach. know fo' suah dat you tell lie. Ol' marse he'd jest tie me up, an' gib me some mo' w'ippin's like he did afore. 'Sides, it'll do 'im good to be skeered 'bout you fer a w'ile; it'll make his heart bleed like he did Crazy Zach.'s back."

"But—"

"No use a-talkin'—not a mite; 'twon't do nary bit o' good. You's got to stay hyar. Better be still, now," and the negro arose and began kindling a fire just out side of the hut.

This done, he returned and opened a kind of pit in one corner of the hut, lined with leaves and twigs, and took from it a whole ham and a small bag of corn meal. Then he sharpened his knife upon a smooth stone, turning to Ada with a grim smile upon his distorted features.

"See, ol' marse Sollars he berry kin'! Keep ol' nigger in plenty bitals. Ho—ho—ho!"

Ada was almost famished, and despite her novel and dangerous situation, her mouth watered at the sight of something to eat, coarse as the viands were. But she revolted at the idea of eating after his cookery, and rising to her feet, she said, with her most winning smile:

"Please let me do the cooking, good Zach. A king, you know, should have somebody to wait upon him."

"Ho—ho! dat's so. Zach. be king, an' hab w'ite missee fo' wait 'pon 'im! Good; you cook meat, den I'll eat um," and the negro, in high glee at the idea, resigned his knife to Ada, and occupied her seat, chuckling horribly to himself as he watched her every motion.

Ada soon prepared the ham for toasting, as there were no cooking utensils to be seen, and then looked around for water to mix the meal with. Zach. beheld her dilemma, and arising, he picked up an old battered tin can, and disappeared through the doorway.

"Dar, missee," said Zach., as he set down the can filled

with clear and fresh water, "now hurry up, fer ol' man is awful hungry. War out late las' night, an' jest woked up w'en I heerd you holler, ober dar."

"I will be quick, Zach," replied Ada, in a tone of well-assured cheerfulness, "for I am hungry, too. I haven't eaten any thing since last night. But what do you bake the hoe-cake on?"

"Dar's de stone, by yer feet, dar."

"Good!" and in a few moments Ada had the corn meal scattered out upon the flat stone and propped up before the fire.

The slices of ham were speedily served in the same way, and were soon cooked to a turn and deftly transferred to some fresh bark that she pulled from one of the trees forming the uprights of the hut.

The really appetizing odor increased her hunger, and Ada began to eat one of the corn cakes, glancing around for something with which to carve her meat.

With a watchfulness that nothing could escape, the negro observed and rightly interpreted this glance, and at once tendered her his knife. Thanking him, Ada soon dispatched her meal and felt greatly encouraged and invigorated by it.

Vague plans all tending toward one object—her escape from the power of the male negro—flashed through her mind, but none that appeared feasible, at first. Unless the negro should fall asleep, during which she might choke him, she had but one other hope.

But if he should sleep, would he leave her at liberty—would he not securely bind her limbs? The other hope was that some one might chance upon the hut, while in search of her. For surely they would not leave a stone unturned but what they would find her!

She knew that the two men whose love she had won, would not rest an instant after the fact of her abduction was discovered, and surely some one of their bands would find the hut. In her desperation she even watched for a chance to murder the negro unwares and possess herself of his musket, believing she would be justified in shooting him, did he oppose her attempt at escape.

But this was not to be done. Evidently Zach. had made up his mind to retain her in his power.

Ada shuddered anew as she realized this, and her heart nearly failed her. But then she rallied, and a bright thought striking her, she said :

“ Zach., I feel dreadfully ill and cold. I believe I am going to have a chill. I have just recovered from an attack of ague. May I go and sit by the fire ?”

“ Sartin, fo’ suah you may, honey. But min’, no foolishin’ now. Ef you tries to run, I’ll shoot ye, fo’ Moses I will !” threatened the negro, tapping the lock of his musket significantly.

As Ada passed her captor, the shudder that shook her entire frame was not altogether assumed.

Zach. noted the tremor, and if he had had any suspicions, they were allayed by this, and he contented himself with changing his position to one that commanded a fair view of the level spot upon which the fire was built, his gun resting across his lap.

Before seating herself, Ada cast into the fire several sticks that were lying near, and then waited awhile before carrying out her plans. When the wood blazed up freely, Ada contrived to dig out of the ground in which they were half-buried, several small sticks and cast them into the blaze.

Being very damp, they sent up a considerable cloud of thick black smoke that arose far above the tree-tops. From time to time this maneuver was repeated, Ada also adding wet leaves, in short, any thing that would increase the denseness of the vapor, and consequently enhance her chances of escape.

For such was her idea. She well knew that the adjacent swamps were being scoured in every direction, and hoped that some watchful eye would discover the smoke and proceed to investigate the cause of such an unexpected sight.

For perhaps an hour she had kept up this signal-smoke, without her object being suspected, assuming an air of deathly illness, while fits of violent trembling would seize her form.

Suddenly the negro dropped his pipe, and, advancing, thrust the embers aside with his foot, and ordered her to enter the hut. Ada obeyed in silence, wondering whether he had divined her purpose, and if so, fearing what might be the consequence. But he only resumed his old position and again filled his pipe.

For nearly another hour they sat in silence, when Ada was aroused by an exclamation from her captor. Glancing up, she saw that he was crouching forward, peering eagerly from the hut entrance, while his hands nervously twitched with the rusty old musket.

Ada, too, lent her head and hearkened. She thought she could distinguish the faint splashing of horses' hoofs in the water. Then came a metallic jingle, followed by a volley of hearty cheers.

There was no longer any doubt; help was at hand, and with difficulty she restrained the cry that trembled upon her lips.

With a keen, stealthy glance around him, Zach. arose and advanced to Ada's side with a gliding motion, one hand fumbling at his waist. But the knife was not there. It still lay where it had been dropped beside the bed where Ada finished her meal.

As she shrunk back from his approach, Ada's hand touched the cold blade, and almost instinctively she hid it in the folds of her dress. Then Zach grasped her in his arms and emerged from the hut.

The sounds of horses' tramping could still be heard, and the sound of horse voices calling to each other, in close proximity to the bush-fringed island. One commanding voice Ada thought she could distinguish above the rest, and a glow of hope invigorated her and roused her spirit anew.

Zach. held his musket in one hand, while his other arm was around Ada's form, clasping her to his brawny breast. Ada's left arm was thus free, and it was the one that clutched the trusty knife.

Just as her captor passed through the fringe of bushes and stepped into the water that was nearly knee-deep, Ada lent over and suddenly drew the keen blade across the back of his right hand, with all her force.

Then wrenching out to the bone, and uttering a wild howl of pain and rage, the negro dropped his rifle, which sunk immediately from view in the water and mud. At the same time, taking advantage of his surprise, Ada writhed from his grasp, uttering a series of piercing screams as she fled through the line of bushes.

Lead shots answered her, both from the island and the

water and she caught a glimpse of several horsemen, whose scarlet coats still showed from beneath the mud and slime. But her peril was not yet passed, for behind her Ada could hear the muffled snarl of Crazy Zach, as he pressed after her through the timber.

"De Forrest—Arthur, save me! for the love of God, save me!"

Even as she spoke, there spouted out before her a jet of flame-tinged smoke, the report being closely followed by a rattling volley of musketry, and, without a groan or a quiver, the riddled corpse of Crazy Zach, sunk to the ground, and Ada, now that her great danger was past, drooped like a broken reed, and sunk into a deathlike swoon.

CHAPTER XII.

ADA'S DECISION.

COLONEL DE FORREST, albeit generally so calm and collected, now acted more like an insane man than one who had full possession of his reasoning faculties, and hung over Ada's senseless form, trying to restore her to life by the remarkable process of pressing his lips repeatedly to her brow, cheeks, and even lips.

Presently the maiden came to her senses, and, with a cry, she shrunk back, fearing lest she should still be in the mad negro's power; but when she recognized her preserver, she sunk back, her surcharged feelings giving vent in a grievous burst of tears.

When these subsided, and she had become more calm, Ada was seated upon an extemporized pillion behind the gallant colonel, her arms wound around his waist, while he held both of her hands in one of his—to keep her from falling off—as they wound through the swamp on their way homeward. In a few words he told her how it was that he had appeared so opportunely.

He had been ranging through the swamp in every direction, since leaving the mansion, at times completely at a loss to determine his whereabouts, but ever spurring on. To this fact—none of his men having any knowledge of the ground or of

swamp scouting—Ada probably owed her rescue, for they did not progress far, in a direct course, and hence did not get beyond view of her signal-smoke, which was sighted at a considerable distance, and the party had immediately made for the spot, arriving as detailed.

After some delay the mansion was reached and Ada's return greeted as if one had returned from the grave, by the slaves, who had all come in from the swamp where they had been sent in anticipation of the robbers' attack. Martin Sellers they found in bed from the effects of his sprained ankle and the anxiety he experienced for the fate of his daughter. Their meeting we must leave to the imagination of the reader.

All traces of the late strife had been cleared away from the grounds, and all was now merriment. Mr. Sellers gave orders for all work to cease, and the slaves to take a holiday, a permission that was greeted with loud and noisy demonstrations of delight.

As the afternoon wore on, the neighbors, who had all turned out upon the hunt as soon as they learned the news, dropped in one by one, and among them came one of Sloan's runners. He had been dispatched by the anxious partisan, to learn if any news had been gained at the plantation, with orders if so, to send up two columns of black smoke.

This was quickly done, and just as the sun set James Sloan dashed up to the gates upon his jaded horse, followed by his men, and rushed up to the house where he was met by the now refreshed maiden, herself. The meeting was cordial, but still there was a slight restraint upon her part that did not escape the judicious eyes of her lover.

De Forest now came up and warmly greeted Sloan, who as cordially returned the handshake. The two men, rivals in love and once rivals in war, had gained a clearer insight into each other's character since the affair in which they had been so strangely brought together, and there was a warm feeling of respect, and almost of friendship, taking the place of the enmity.

"Captain Sloan, can not we come to some amicable arrangement for a few hours, at least, by which we can meet and mingle together as friends, our men as well as ourselves?"

It is an extraordinary occasion and I know that either of us would deeply regret having to leave such pleasant quarters upon so short a notice."

"You but anticipate me, colonel," replied Sloan, glancing toward his men. "As you say, it would be a pity for such good fellows as all the men have shown themselves to be, this day, to get to cutting each other's throats now that the purpose we combined for is accomplished. But can you answer for your men?"

"With them, my command is law."

"And I believe that my request is the same with my men. Well, then, say we agree to a truce for to-night and to-morrow."

"With all my heart!" and another hand clasp ratified the agreement.

"Well, boys," said Sloan, as he advanced to where his rangers were grouped, in company with his rival and Ada, "you see that the lady is safe—"

A loud and hearty cheer interrupted him, and Ada blushing bowed her thanks.

"Now you've all had a hard and tough day's work, and it would really be a pity to get to loggerheads with those men yonder, who joined with you to wipe out the accursed Black Band. Don't you think that you could make—and keep—a treaty with them for a day and night, more especially as we're going to have grand doings here. Food and drink by the wagon-load, a dance and music, if you wish it, and a good time generally. How is it?"

A general cry of satisfaction testified that his proposition met with their approval, and thanking them, the same result was obtained from the English soldiers.

For some minutes after returning to the house, Sloan appeared very quiet and ill at ease, and upon being rallied about it by his cousin, finally blurted out, with his usual straightforwardness.

"Well, I *am* uneasy, and you must know what it is about. Can I speak unreservedly before our friend, the colonel?"

"Of course," faltered the blushing maiden, for she well knew what was coming, and yet did not know how to avoid it.

"Well, then, you know that we are—were once, I should say— betrothed. Mayhap, as you once told me, we entered

into it before we really knew our own minds ; but be that as it may, I love you still, with all my heart, and there is no change upon my part. In you, I fear there has been, ever since—excuse me if I speak plainly ; it is my nature to do so—you have known Colonel De Forrest, here.”

“One moment, Captain Sloan,” said his rival. “I admit that I have proposed to Miss Sollars, our mutual friend here, but it was while I was ignorant that you had a prior claim. She has honored me with no definite answer, as yet.”

“Thank you ; I expected as much. At any rate, we will be honorable rivals, and not get to cutting each other’s throats, as we were once on the point of doing. Let us ask her decision, and each one promise to abide by it with as good a grace as he can summon ; the luckless one to withdraw all claim or pretension—”

“James !”

“It is best so, Ada,” quietly added Sloan. “Well sir, your answer ?”

“I can give but the one ; and upon my part no illwill shall ever be felt or manifested in any shape,” warmly returned the Englishman.

“Then there is only one thing further, Ada,” urged Sloan. “I relinquish all the claim I may have had, owing to your pledge. Do not think of that, but give us your answer.”

“James, I can not, now ; it is impossible !” faltered Ada, her voice betraying the deep emotion she felt. “But to-morrow night, at this time, I will give each of you my reply, in a sealed note. But these you must promise not to open until you are away from here.”

“Well, then,” added the young partisan, in a tone of forced gayety, “we must bear our probation as best we may, and until then let us be merry, and thankful that we are once more together after our fearful distress. Come, let us go down to the lawn.

The promise given the men was well kept. Slaves were hired from some of the adjoining plantations to attend to the cooking and other work, so that none of those belonging to Martin Sollars could have just cause to complain, and the mirth and fun waxed high and boisterous.

Hogs were barbecued, fowl were roasted, and the impro-

vised table spread beneath the magnolias fairly groaned with their weight of edibles and comestibles. Violins, banjos and tambourines were in full blast, around the grounds which were lighted up to almost the brightness of noonday, and dancing was commenced.

But we have neither the time nor the space to describe the festivities of that night and the ensuing day, and need only add that every thing passed off pleasantly and peaceably. Then, as the shades of night settled down over the earth, and the troops were in saddle, only awaiting their leaders, Ada was reminded of her promise, and slipping a small note into the hand of each of her rival suitors, she glided away before a word could be spoken.

In silence the leaders parted, each leading his men in an opposite direction, and the house and plantation were soon left behind them. Then James Sloan tore the seal of his note and by the pale rays of the moon, he deciphered its contents.

The hollow groan that broke from his lips told but too plainly what had been Ada's decision, and for a moment he reeled in his saddle as if about to fall.

Yes, Ada Sollars had made her decision, and accepted Arthur De Forrest, conditionally. If he came to her when the war was over, and said that his heart was still faithful, then she would become his bride.

And this he did; returning safe and with honor unblemished, and they were married. James Sloan was at the wedding, as was his brother Bertie, and Ada was greatly relieved at a few words her elder cousin whispered in her ear. Whether these words had any connection with the wedding of James Sloan, or not, we can not say, but a short time afterward he really did marry, a fine, rosy-cheeked lassie, who was, in *his* opinion, just a little—a very little—prettier and sweeter than his cousin, Mrs. De Forrest.

So you see that there is a cure for "broken hearts and blighted hopes," after all!

THE END.

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